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22 January 2016

Dear Tim

**ADVICE FROM THE NORTHERN IRELAND FOOD ADVISORY COMMITTEE TO  
THE BOARD OF THE FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY ON ISSUES ADDRESSED  
BY THE COMMITTEE: JANUARY 2016**

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) has given its consideration to the following papers, due to be discussed at the upcoming meeting of the FSA Board:

- A Data Driven FSA.
- UK Local Authority Food Law Enforcement Annual Report 2014/15.
- Delivering the Food Standards Agency's Regulatory Strategy.

These papers were presented to the committee, by teleconference, by Julie Pierce - FSA Director of Openness, Data & Digital; Sian Thomas – FSA Head of Information Management; Nina Purcell – FSA Director for Wales; and Rod Ainsworth –FSA Director Of Regulatory And Legal Strategy and I am grateful to all of them for allowing NIFAC the opportunity to consider the content of these papers.

NIFAC's comments on the papers discussed are recorded below.

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Final Version as at 22 January 2016

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A Data Driven FSA

Julie Pierce, the FSA's Director of Openness, Data & Digital and Sian Thomas the FSA's Head of Information Management, delivered a presentation by video conference from the FSA's office at Aviation House in London, giving a proposed approach to systematically make the best use of data.

This paper covers a very wide scope and, accordingly, engages with the topic at a high level. It was interesting to hear about the large number of information assets the FSA currently has. Information Asset Registers tend not to be particularly descriptive. Until the range of data already possessed by the FSA can be known, it will be difficult to know which assets are the more useful. An audit of this information might prove to be valuable.

Much of the information relevant to the work of the FSA in NI is held at NI executive and local government level and assurance Northern Ireland will benefit proportionately from the FSA's data analysis expertise would be welcomed.

Greater emphasis could also be placed on how the FSA might be able to make best use of industry data. We have already seen some of the good work done by large businesses in this area.

Care should also be taken to consider the necessary human dimension required in data handling, which cannot be replaced by technology. A fuller description of how this aspect of information management will be handled would be welcomed in a later, more developed paper on this topic.

UK Local Authority Food Law Enforcement Annual Report 2014/15

Nina Purcell, the FSA Director for Wales, delivered a presentation, by video conference, from Southgate House in Cardiff outlining the above paper.

This is an interesting and important paper. Local Authority information is key for the FSA to benchmark areas of the strategy.

Though Northern Ireland appears to be well placed compared to the UK overall, it is concerning to note that the overall position is not good. Nevertheless, there are aspects of the information, which do appear positive. The picture appears to be a complex one and could be interpreted as representing an improvement in enforcement. It would be interesting to see if there was any significant read across to incidents of food borne disease.

The Committee however expressed some concerns. The focus on higher risk establishments is legitimate, but this should not take away from the need to be watchful of those establishments deemed to be of lower risk. Also, the decrease in the number of samples is of concern, particularly so if this is as a result of financial

pressures. The decrease in the number of FTE Environmental Health Officers particularly in England is significant and suggests stress in the system. These factors point to the need for a more fundamental review of delivery.

Delivering the Food Standards Agency's Regulatory Strategy

Rod Ainsworth, FSA Director Of Regulatory And Legal Strategy and Nina Purcell, the FSA Director for Wales, presented, by video conference, from Aviation House in London and Southgate House in Cardiff respectively, outlining the above paper.

Overall, this is an interesting paper. Some Committee members felt that more detail would have been welcomed, drilling down more into the evidence of inspection.

A suggested drafting change at the eighth bullet point in paragraph 2.3 to "intervention by governments across the UK" was raised by one member in order to better reflect devolution.

The Committee noted that much regulation is determined at EU level and queried how much room there was for change. It was suggested that there may be much more room for manoeuvre than had been traditionally considered and that the flexibility inherent within the rules could be better exploited. Work was also being undertaken at EU level to push for innovation and modernisation.

In discussing the principles which should underlie the work to be taken forward the Committee welcomed the focus on outcomes rather than process. It also welcomed the assurances that there would be consumer engagement, and suggested that these two principles should be included in the list.

The Committee noted the interconnectedness of the themes and direction in all three papers and the need for integration of the forward work plans.

I am copying this letter to the Board Secretariat and to the Chief Executive.



pp. Henrietta Campbell (approved by Henrietta Campbell and signed in her absence)  
Chair, Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee.