



Heather Hancock  
Chair  
Food Standards Agency  
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09 March 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: MARCH 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 7 March to discuss the following papers, due to be considered at the upcoming meeting of the FSA Board.

- Science Update and Update from the Chair of the Science Council
- Raw Drinking Milk
- International Strategy

Discussions on these items were led by presentations from Patrick Miller, the FSA's Head of Science Strategy and Governance; Colin Sullivan, the FSA's Chief Operating Officer and Gary Davis, the FSA's Deputy Head of Regulatory Delivery Division; and Catherine Bowles, the FSA's Deputy Director for EU Exit, Regulatory & International Strategy and I am grateful to them for assisting NIFAC's consideration of these topics.

NIFAC also heard updates on Nutrition Surveillance from Naomi Davidson, the FSA in NI's Senior Scientific Advisor for Dietary Health, and on the Biannual Public Attitudes Tracker from Grace Fleck, Insights Officer with the Openness, Data & Digital team and I'd like to thank them also for bringing these items to the Committee. I include the key points of NIFAC's discussions below:

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### Science Update and Update from the Chair of the Science Council

Patrick Miller, the FSA's Head of Science Strategy and Governance, joined the meeting by video link from the FSA's office at Clive House in London to introduce this item on the two papers due to be discussed at the upcoming meeting of the FSA Board.

The Committee Welcomed both the papers and suggested that there may be many more opportunities for the FSA to benefit from the science and expertise that there is in industry and academia. It was acknowledged, however, that there would be sensitivities around collaboration with organisations that the FSA would later have to regulate and caution would be key to avoid conflicts of interest.

One Committee member also pointed out that various countries that may have differing standards regimes, allowing processes currently restricted within the European Union, such as lactic acid washes for poultry or hormone treatment for beef, can always present evidence as to the safety of those standards and claim to have science on their side. The FSA's approach of presenting all available evidence on the safety of processes to inform policy decisions is commended. It could however, lead to a situation where it appears that the FSA is giving support to changes in our own standards regime when this would require a policy decision to be made.

### Raw Drinking Milk

Gary Davis, the FSA's Deputy Head of Regulatory Delivery Division and Colin Sullivan, the FSA's Chief Operating Officer, introduced an item on this paper due to be discussed at the upcoming meeting of the FSA Board.

This is clearly an issue that has grown significantly. The Committee were interested to know whether this is the result of producers who have always been interested in producing RDM now doing so or whether there is an actual growth in interest in producing RDM in the first place. Understanding this will help determine likely future growth in production.

The fact that an interim paper was being brought on this subject was welcomed by the Committee. It was questioned whether the figure of 3.2 million litres being produced was all being sold to consumers as RDM or whether a portion of this was ending up in bulk tanks. This could be difficult to tease out but could be key to getting a clearer picture of levels of consumption as opposed to production. The increase in associated food-borne disease, however, underlines the need for the work around RDM.

It was pointed out that a high number of children had been involved in instances of food-borne disease associated with RDM. Disappointment was expressed at this by members of the Committee and it was questioned whether this suggested a greater level of naivety among those who purchase RDM than had previously been thought

to pertain. This could support a case for stronger, Northern Ireland style, controls being established across those areas of the UK where RDM is sold. It was also suggested that the divergent controls across the nations of the UK would likely be confusing to many consumers who may question why there is such variation. It was also questioned if there was evidence that consumers understood the difference between unhomogenised and unpasteurised milk.

One NIFAC member also queried the use of the word “unwell” in the proposed warning as this term can be interpreted in a narrower or broader way by the consumer seeking to exclude herself from the category. The term ‘immunosuppressed’ may have a more precise meaning though it was accepted that it may equally be poorly understood by some.

### International Strategy

Catherine Bowles, the FSA’s Deputy Director for EU Exit, Regulatory & International Strategy, introduced an item on the FSA’s international strategy. This presentation was delivered by video conference from the FSA’s office at Clive House in London.

NIFAC supported this paper and commented on the importance of the FSA having an effective international strategy with only one year remaining before the UK exits from the EU.

It was acknowledged that the UK would be leaving the EU with similar standards to those it currently has but it was questioned whether over the medium term maintaining or improving these standards could make it difficult for UK farms to compete with imported products from third countries with a less prohibitive standards regime but the ability to make the claim that they have the scientific evidence on their side to demonstrate the safety of their product. Conversely, a relaxation of standards to allow such farms to compete could make it difficult for them to export.

NIFAC welcomed the fact that the issues raised in the paper were clearly within the view of the FSA.

### Nutrition Surveillance

Naomi Davidson, the FSA in NI’s Senior Scientific Advisor (Dietary Health), introduced an item on Nutrition Surveillance. This presentation represents the first of a series of regular planned updates from the Standards and Dietary Health team that NIFAC will receive over the coming year.

This was a very informative and engaging presentation making good use of infographics to illustrate the scale of the challenges faced in dietary health for Northern Ireland.

The presentation clearly demonstrated the need to address the prevalence of overweight and obesity in Northern Ireland. The power of the retailers in influencing

purchasing behaviours is considerable and NIFAC welcomed the approach of the FSA in NI to build relationships with retail organisations to encourage greater purchasing of healthier foods. It was acknowledged that, given the varied remit of the FSA across the nations of the UK, it was easier in NI to influence the promotional behaviour of smaller retailers, who may not have a UK wide promotional strategy.

It was also questioned whether the figures for the changes in behaviour around buying food on promotion may to some extent be credited to consumers doing more of their shopping in traditionally lower priced supermarkets where there may be fewer promotions in general.

### Public Attitudes Tracker

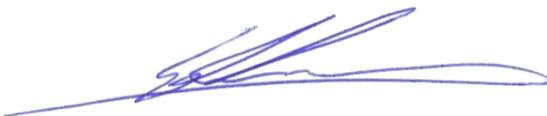
Grace Fleck, Insights Officer with the FSA's Openness, Data & Digital team presented an item on the recently published Biannual Public Attitudes Tracker.

This was a very interesting presentation with some fascinating insights into how the FSA is regarded by consumers and the divergent attitudes to food safety issues between Northern Ireland and England.

The high level of trust for the FSA in NI demonstrated in this presentation is good news but raises questions over why the FSA is appreciated by consumers in Northern Ireland more greatly than those in England. It was suggested that Northern Ireland's Rural profile may account for some of this but it was also considered a credit to the Communications team in the NI office who have performed a great deal of stakeholder and consumer engagement activities, which have helped to increase the visibility of the FSA within Northern Ireland.

Members expressed curiosity about the fact that Northern Ireland consumers have lower levels of food borne illness, report a higher level of concern around food poisoning yet also report being more trusting of restaurant and catering staff to prepare food safely. It was suggested that the mandatory display of FHRS ratings in Northern Ireland may go some way to account for the seeming incongruity of those two positions. It was interesting to hear that figures seem to suggest that an increase in the visibility of the FSA for whatever reason, for example due to increased media attention during a food incident, seems to increase public trust in the FSA across the UK.

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