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8 July 2016

Dear Heather

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

- Update on development of a framework for assessment of foods which may present an increased likelihood of harm.
- An update on burgers served less than thoroughly cooked in food service outlets.
- Antimicrobial resistance.
- Annual Report on the handling of incidents covering the period up to the end of March 2016.

These papers were presented to the committee, via video link, by Nick Laverty and Patrick Miller of the FSA's Hygiene Delivery Branch; Javier Dominguez, the FSA's Veterinary Director and Head of the Foodborne Diseases Control Unit; and Jason Feeney, the FSA's Chief Operating Officer and I am grateful to all of them for allowing NIFAC the opportunity to consider the content of these papers.

The Committee also received an update from Kirsten Dunbar – the FSA in NI's head of Operational Policy and Delivery – on the work of that team and from Joanne Casey

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of the FSA in NI's Standards and Dietary Health team on the refresh of the Eatwell Guide and I'd like to thank them both for these updates.

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

Update on development of a framework for assessment of foods which may present an increased likelihood of harm & An update on burgers served less than thoroughly cooked in food service outlets.

Nick Laverty and Patrick Miller of the FSA's Hygiene Delivery Branch introduced the above papers, by video link from the FSA's office at Aviation House in London with the FSA's Head of Microbiological Risk Assessment, Paul Cook, joining the meeting by teleconference.

It was encouraging to hear the membership of the ad-hoc expert advisory group. The membership gives confidence that the expertise and experience required is there.

If change is to be the driver for the application of the framework, it will be key, not only to be clear about what will be considered to constitute a change, but also to examine how we will know that change has occurred.

Applied to the serving of burgers less than well done, this raises particular complexities for a regulator seeking to balance consumer choice with maintaining an awareness of the risks consumers are being asked to consider. This complexity means that the FSA needs to communicate 3 separate messages on burgers. Firstly, when cooking at home, the FSA must advise consumers to ensure burgers are cooked thoroughly. Secondly, when eating in an establishment, which has an advisory statement about their burgers and measures in place to minimise risks. Thirdly, there will need to be a message about how consumers should expect their burger to be cooked when eating in an establishment that has no such plan for minimising risks. This will present a considerable communications challenge for the FSA and it is good to hear that a communications plan has been agreed. Where controls are in place, consumers should know.

It is reassuring to note that, where businesses are being made aware of the measures they will need to have in place in order to safely offer burgers less than thoroughly cooked, they often reassess the value of offering this choice. Anecdotal evidence from around the table at the meeting suggested that restaurants will often refuse customers the option where it is requested and the establishment is not equipped to provide it safely. This is encouraging.

The proposals for an enhanced review of PHE epidemiological evidence, including the mining of the STEC enhanced surveillance system, is welcomed and similar arrangements should be considered for NI through the Public Health Agency. However, it is recognised that the level of reported cases of STEC in NI is significantly lower than in England, many of which are not associated with food and,

as VTEC tends to peak in NI during the 3rd quarter of the year, caution is advised should early figures from the new system of monitoring, to be in place by September 2016, appear optimistic.

Though currently not a common feature of establishments that cater for customers seeking burgers less than thoroughly cooked, for the purposes of future proofing the policy on consumer messaging, it may be beneficial to consider challenges posed by such food when ordered remotely, whether by phone or over the internet.

There will also be a challenge for Local Authorities to regulate and this will need care given existing pressures on local government.

There has clearly been a huge amount of work done to get this point and the FSA is to be congratulated.

Antimicrobial resistance

Javier Dominguez of the FSA's Food Safety Policy team, introduced this paper, by video link from the FSA's office at Aviation House.

This paper is welcome and is the first paper on this topic to be considered in a long time. It is not entirely clear what the FSA's role is in tackling the problem of antimicrobial resistance and, in particular, where the FSA will lead. It was reassuring to hear that the Department for Health in Northern Ireland hosts an expert group on the issue including representatives from the FSA as well as the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).

The problem of antimicrobial resistance is well known and it behoves all sectors to do what is needed to ensure the public's safety. There has been an increase, in the United States, of producers certifying poultry as antibiotic free and it is interesting to hear about research being carried out both in academia as well as by industry in Northern Ireland. Regulations can help to protect individual consumers, while movements such as 'no antibiotics ever' in the US relate to how food is produced more widely.

NIFAC endorses the aspirations of the paper. The next step would include a delivery plan and NIFAC look forward to seeing how this will develop.

Update from the FSA in NI Operational Policy and Delivery Team

Kirsten Dunbar, the FSA in NI's Head of the Operational Policy and Delivery team, delivered an update on the work of the team in NI. This is the third update of a series where the various teams within the FSA in NI take turns to provide updates to NIFAC about key activities and work carried out by that team.

This was an extremely impressive presentation. NIFAC frequently becomes aware of the work of individual teams as the result of a discrete piece of work and the day-to-day work of officials within the NI office can frequently go unrecognised. It is clear from this presentation that a significant amount of work is carried out as a matter of routine.

Annual Report on the handling of incidents covering the period up to the end of March 2016

Jason Feeney, the FSA's Chief Operating Officer and Richard Hoskin, the FSA's Head of Incidents & Resilience, introduced the above paper by video link from the FSA's office at Foss House in York.

This was a helpful paper and it was good to see a structured process for capturing the lessons learnt from previous incidents. It is also encouraging to hear evidence of the close working relationship between the incidents teams in the 3 nations and the approach to devolution throughout this paper is to be commended.

The importance of this work, and the fact that however many incidents are averted, we are only ever one incident away from reputational damage should it be mishandled, comes through strongly in the paper and the resilience and strength of the organisation is well presented.

Eatwell Plate Refresh

Joanne Casey, of the FSA in NI's Standards and Dietary Health team, delivered a presentation, requested at the previous NIFAC meeting, on the refresh of the Eatwell Guide.

This was an excellent presentation conveying some quite concerning statistics around nutrition in Northern Ireland, particularly for younger people.

The guide would be particularly useful for schools and it is good to hear about engagement with the Home Economics teachers' conference and other activities to ensure a widespread distribution.

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