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16 September 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: SEPTEMBER 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:

- Animal Welfare
- Regulating Our Future Programme Update
- The Consumer Interest in the Food System

These papers were presented to the committee, via video link, by Jason Feeney, the FSA's Chief Operating Officer; Nina Purcell, FSA Director of Wales and Local Delivery and Ely Mirzahosseinkhan, FSA Consumer Engagement Manager and I am grateful to all of them for allowing NIFAC the opportunity to consider the content of these papers.

The Committee also received updates from Quintin Oliver and Tristen Kelso of Stratagem NI on the progress with the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government and from Sharon Gilmore, the FSA in NI's Head of Standards and Dietary Health on the work of that team and I'd like to thank them for these updates too. NIFAC's comments on the papers discussed are recorded below.

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Animal Welfare

Jason Feeney, the FSA's Chief Operating Officer, introduced this paper by video link from the FSA's office at Foss House in York. This is a good paper and should be a good news story for consumers, demonstrating the seriousness with which the FSA is treating the issue of animal welfare. This is an issue that holds importance for citizens across England, Wales and Northern Ireland whether consumers of meat and animal products or not. This paper presents an opportunity to raise the profile of this area of work.

The Committee noted that, in Northern Ireland, the policy, delivery and enforcement of animal welfare issues is the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and they hold the NI specific figures related to animal welfare. If the FSA is moving towards a position of disclosure around the figures, it will be important that Northern Ireland is not left out. Northern Ireland citizens will want this information. It will be key to consider discussions with DAERA around the publication of these figures.

The paper raises the issue of intelligence gathered from behavioural economics in the meat industry. It will be interesting to hear more about the impacts of this approach in England and Wales to see what lessons could be learned for the meat industry in Northern Ireland and how the intelligence gathered to date has been applied.

Consideration should also be given to false impressions of high standards of animal welfare that could be created by the use of terms such as free-range. The animals involved in the production of a product may be free-range but there will be a communications challenge to ensure that consumers are aware of the limits this claim has for welfare standards.

Regulating Our Future Programme Update

Nina Purcell, FSA Director of Wales and Local Delivery, introduced this paper by video link from the FSA's office at Southgate House in Cardiff.

NIFAC noted that this area is one that is likely to experience a significant impact from the UK's exit from the European Union and were reassured to hear that a detailed impact assessment on the ramifications of this for the Regulating Our Future programme has been carried out, acknowledging that contingency planning is necessarily speculative without more detailed knowledge of the Government strategy for EU withdrawal.

While it is early to judge the efficacy of the Hothouse events, the first results show promise in identifying where improvements in the regulatory system can be made. The early focus on large, multi-outlet businesses will give an early indication of the

number of inspections businesses are subject to when operating across the UK. This could allow for a better appraisal of the value of these inspections.

The Committee expressed support for the direction of travel but also emphasised the risks involved in ensuring resource availability for what is a significant change in model for the FSA. The proliferation of external expert groups set up to deliver the programme since NIFAC's previous update on the programme in May appears to evidence the scale of the programme.

Programme for Government

Quintin Oliver and Tristen Kelso of Stratagem NI, delivered a presentation setting out an overview of the new Northern Ireland Executive's Program for Government (PfG) approach, considering implications for the FSA.

NIFAC noted that this is the largest change in public sector culture in Northern Ireland since the foundation of the present devolved administration and it will be key to examine thoroughly how a similar, outcomes based approach has worked in Scotland and, importantly, where it has fallen short to ensure that similar mistakes can be avoided in Northern Ireland.

The FSA should also seek to ensure that the language we use reflects that of the PfG to highlight to the Executive the role of the FSA in delivering the indicators for those outcomes where the FSA's policies will have an impact. The FSA in NI receives its funding through the NI Department of Finance and it will be important to be able to demonstrate to them the value the FSA already brings in delivering the PfG.

The Consumer Interest In The Food System

Ely Mirzahosseinkhan, FSA Consumer Engagement Manager, introduced this paper by video link from the FSA's office at Aviation House in London.

This is a good paper and the Annexes in particular are impressive, giving good visual representations of the issues.

Many of the issues faced by the FSA in terms of consumer insight will inevitably be faced by other regulators across a range of sectors. NIFAC advises continued engagement with other regulators to see where information sharing can benefit the FSA.

NIFAC also supports the suggestion in the paper of an enhanced role for the members of the FSA Board as well as members of NIFAC and WFAC in engaging with consumers. NIFAC members would also be keen to hear about upcoming citizen's group events.

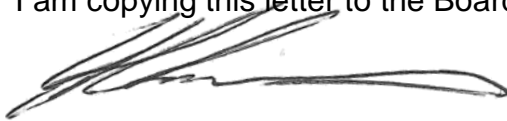
The work highlights the fact that there is no such thing as the typical consumer and that local data is essential.

Update from the FSA in NI Standards and Dietary Health Team

Sharon Gilmore, the FSA in NI's Head of Standards and Dietary Health delivered a presentation on the work of this team. This was the fourth 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 excellent presentation and the whole team is to be congratulated for the scope and scale of the work carried out in Standards and Dietary Health. This is a particularly important area for the FSA with Northern Ireland as the only region where the FSA retains a dietary health responsibility.

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



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