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Chair
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18 November 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: NOVEMBER 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:

- Review Of The National Food Crime Unit.
- FSA Science: Retrospective Update And Prospective Priorities.
- Food And Feed Surveillance.
- Developing Proportionate Controls For Risky Foods.

These papers were presented to the committee, via video link, by Kate Todd, FSA EU & International Strategy and Rod Ainsworth, the FSA's Director of Regulatory and Legal Strategy; Patrick Miller, Joint Head of the Chief Scientific Adviser's Team; Guy Poppy, the FSA's Chief Scientific Adviser; and Javier Dominguez, the FSA's Veterinary Director and Head of Science, Evidence and Research. 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 Roberta Ferson, the FSA in NI's Head of Finance, Business Support and Communications on the work of her team and I'd like to thank her for this update too.

Following the open meeting, NIFAC continued discussions in a closed, strategic session where they considered the ways in which the Committee could add greater value to FSA insight and decision making. They also agreed, at this session, to

consider a response to the Northern Ireland Executive's consultation on the Programme for Government.

NIFAC's comments on the items discussed in the open session are recorded below.

Review of the National Food Crime Unit

Kate Todd of the FSA's EU & International Strategy team and Rod Ainsworth, the FSA's Director of Regulatory and Legal Strategy, introduced the Board paper on the review of the National Food Crime Unit, by video link from the FSA's office at Aviation House in London.

This is a very comprehensive paper and the Committee agreed with its recommendations. It was considered that there was however a lack of detail for NI and that the review has not, at this stage, sufficiently considered the implications for the devolved administrations.

The clarity provided at the meeting about the preference for the Food Crime Unit to have prosecuting powers was welcomed and it may have been beneficial for a statement to that effect to be included in the paper to make this more explicit. The Committee agreed with the approach.

While it was acknowledged that the FSA has always had protocols to ensure the security of sensitive information, it was considered that the FSA's dedication to transparency still provided a source of concern for industry when sharing information with the FSA. It was considered that this might be partially addressed by constituting the Food Crime Unit as an Arms-Length body of the FSA. However, doing so would raise more questions over the level of oversight and governance of the Unit and more details on how any such body could be constituted would be welcomed.

It was suggested that looking to the collaborative model, which exists in the Republic of Ireland, may be informative for how such a Unit could operate effectively in NI and is similar to the approach to food crime taken by staff in the FSA's NI office currently.

FSA Science: Retrospective Update and Prospective Priorities

Guy Poppy, the FSA's Chief Scientific Adviser and Patrick Miller, Joint Head of the Chief Scientific Adviser's Team, introduced this paper by video link from the FSA's office at Aviation House in London.

The paper gives a figure for the amount the FSA spends on externally commissioned science. NIFAC suggested that it would also be useful if a figure for how much the FSA spends internally on science could be included. It was acknowledged that this figure would represent the staff costs rather than the cost of the research but it would help to give a more complete picture of the actual spend.

The Committee supported the suggestion that, in reviewing the trajectory of science spending, the FSA should examine what is contained within core business spend. Consideration should be given to what, within this area, is a statutory requirement of the FSA and must be maintained. This may result in an effective decrease in core business spend, allowing budget to be reallocated toward investment.

It was observed that the paper lacked a devolution section. Given the divergence in the remit between England, Wales and Northern Ireland, it was suggested there is a strong case for future reports to include a statement acknowledging the significance of devolution for FSA Science and include region specific figures where appropriate to do so.

Food and Feed Surveillance

Javier Dominguez, the FSA's Veterinary Director and Head of Science, Evidence and Research, introduced the above Board paper by video link from the FSA's office at Aviation House in London.

The Committee welcomed the new approach to surveillance and noted that the work being done on AMR as a pilot of the new system was appropriate. It was also agreed that it would be appropriate for the Board to consider and agree the priorities for surveillance annually and receive reports on material risk management actions identified by such surveillance.

It was concerning to hear that, despite finding a widespread awareness of the need to share information for the public good, industry is still often reluctant to share data with the FSA as commercially sensitive information is perceived to be vulnerable to the Agency's commitment to openness. There is a question of whether an awareness of the issue and the public good presents sufficient motivation. It was suggested that there is a good example to be found in work done by the Northern Ireland Grain Trade Association in Northern Ireland where it had been demonstrated that the public good and commercial benefit are not mutually exclusive.

NIFAC noted the scale of the issue of anti-microbial resistance (AMR). It was suggested that, as a global issue, maintaining a uniformity of approach with other EU member states should remain key aspect of the AMR program post-Brexit. An outline of the link to the FSA Science budget would be welcomed including a quantum for future research and an outline of whether this would constitute core business or investment to better present the impact of this work for FSA Science generally.

Developing Proportionate Controls for Risky Foods

Patrick Miller, Joint Head of the Chief Scientific Adviser's Team, introduced this paper by video link from the FSA's office at Aviation House in London.

NIFAC welcomed this paper as presenting a very good and logical analysis of a complex subject. The Committee fully supported the approach and look forward to seeing how it will be taken up.

Update from the FSA in NI Finance, Business Support and Communications Team

Roberta Ferson, the FSA in NI's Head of Finance, Business Support and Communications, delivered a presentation on the work of this team. This was the fifth update of a series where the various teams within the FSA in NI take turns to update NIFAC on key activities and work carried out by that team.

The Committee congratulated the FSA on the scope and quality of the work displayed in this presentation.

The move toward social media and online communications was supported, emphasising that a focus should also be maintained on those lacking the means to access these messages. These are frequently the most vulnerable individuals who could benefit most from information. It was acknowledged that the FSA also does good outreach and events work. The importance of education and of getting the message to the right consumers was highlighted as the key to effective communications and the evidence based way in which the FSA does its communications work was commended.

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