

**REPORT FROM THE CHAIR OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND FOOD ADVISORY
COMMITTEE**

Executive Summary

1. The attached report includes advice from the Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee.
2. The Board is invited to **note** the report by the Chair of the Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee. **No action** is required.

Food Standards Agency Northern Ireland

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NIFAC Meetings

1. NIFAC met on 29 March at the FSANI offices, Belfast. An overview of the Committee's discussion follows:

FSANI Business Plan (Overview)

2. FSANI Assistant Director presented an overview of the FSANI Business Plan 2006 / 2007 in closed session. The Committee provided comment and advice as appropriate including encouragement to develop partnerships that will enhance delivery for consumers in NI. NIFAC were especially anxious to ensure that the NDNS in NI should proceed with haste to provide an evidence base for the diet and nutrition work. NIFAC encouraged the Executive to develop the list of research needs so that when/if funding became available it would be clear what the priorities would be.

Sustainable Development

3. Members were grateful to Dr Alison Spalding, Consumer Choice Division who briefed the Committee on Sustainable Development. The Committee agreed the following:
 - The Committee, Agency and the Board should all take sustainability issues into account when giving advice and in policy formulation and implementation. This may be challenging at times, so trade-offs must be carefully considered.
 - Expertise must be sought on sustainability issues where appropriate. This will maintain the Agency's commitment to being an evidence-based organisation.
 - The Committee should utilise the sustainable development guidelines in order to ensure NIFAC advice is mindful of sustainability issues.
 - There is a need for the retrospective analysis of FSA and EU policies that impact on sustainability. A time line for revisiting some of these should be developed.
 - The Board would benefit from a training session on sustainable development.
 - Mechanisms must be put in place to assure the Board that the Sustainability Guidelines are implemented across the Agency.

FSANI Outreach Programme

4. The Committee was grateful to Greg Irwin, FSANI Assistant Director and Andrea Farrell-Marnoch, FSANI Food Standards and Consumer Choice Unit for their respective briefs on the FSANI Outreach Programme and FSANI's work on food poverty and nutrition. In conclusion:
 - The Committee welcomed FSANI's activities addressing food and nutrition issues and encouraged the continued use of competitions in stimulating initiatives to educate and help consumers. Additionally it did raise the profile of FSANI.
 - Food poverty affects a broad range of consumers and the three target groups addressed (elderly, homeless, students) were not necessarily representative of many others in similar need. Members looked forward to feedback on the Agency's work in this area once the Diet and Nutrition Strategy had been published.
 - The Committee welcomes the Agency's involvement in development of the Fit Futures report and the Food and Nutrition Strategy to address food poverty and nutrition. All members received a copy of Fit Futures, which was discussed at the next meeting.

TSE and Sheep

5. The Committee was grateful to David Carruthers, FSA TSE Division who delivered a presentation on TSE and sheep by video-conference. Members agreed the following:
 - Since the evidence was still being collected and the picture would change at intervals, the Agency should keep an open mind on all potential controls available to prevent BSE infected sheep entering the food chain. However, **if** BSE were found in sheep, then the Committee would recommend:
 - Testing to eliminate TSE positive animals from the food chain. This would complement the current controls. The age at which testing should be implemented needs to be factored based on advice from SEAC.
 - Analytical measures should be improved and resources increased to ensure a sophisticated cheap and specific BSE test in sheep. This work should be started now.
 - The Agency must remain open and transparent to consumers, providing access to what is known about the disease.

- The Committee was not qualified to give advice on the issue of atypical scrapie, but did feel that a specific atypical scrapie test rather than genotype testing would be more appropriate.

6. NIFAC met again on 17 May in Bangor, Co Down and discussed the following:

Feasibility Study for the FSANI Cooking Bus (Mrs Jennings) (Closed session)

7. Mrs Maria Jennings, Head of FSANI Consumer Choice and Food Standards presented the options being considered for an FSANI cooking bus. The bus would aim to raise the current level of understanding and skills in food hygiene and safe food handling, facilitate a greater understanding of food issues, and demonstrate the relevance of the FSA. Since much of this is still being negotiated, the discussion was held in closed session. NIFAC provided advice at this interim stage which the Executive will consider going forward.

Openness (Mr Harvey)

8. Mr Alan Harvey, Head of FSA Corporate and Board Secretariat presented the key issues and challenges facing the Agency in regard to its policy of conducting business in an open and transparent manner, and agreed the following:

The Board's balance of openness

- The Committee supported the key principle of using openness to build and maintain the trust of consumers.
- The principles and practice of openness reached further than merely conducting open Board meetings, and included many aspects of FSA business from research to the Agency's policy decisions.
- It was necessary to manage the risk associated with openness, and circumstances would demand that certain topics be dealt with in closed session. However, where possible, the Board's policy debates should continue to be conducted in open session.

Publishing brand names

- The Agency should operate a 'name and shame' policy in circumstances where:
 - The law had been broken;
 - Codes Of Practice had been breached to an extent where public health is compromised.

- There may be circumstances under which brand names should not be published, for example, in the case of research surveys or forensic studies being carried out.
- The Agency should consider a 'name and praise' policy as well as the 'name and shame'. However there were issues of inequity because of sampling methodologies and thus the context must be clearly laid out in any report published by the FSA.
- The FSA's decision on publishing brand names must be consistent across the food chain and upheld by all appropriate authorities. Initiatives such as 'scores on the doors' may be an example of this at Local Authority level.

Eating for Health (Mrs Hignett)

9. Mrs Rosemary Hignett, Head of FSA Consumer Choice and Dietary Health reviewed the Agency's strategic targets on dietary health and asked for comment.
 - The Committee agreed with the Agency's priorities for 2006/2010 but would encourage the inclusion of the '5-a-day' fruit and vegetable message.
 - Members recognised that the absence of a nutrition strategy in Northern Ireland presents a serious challenge to the process, and encouraged the Agency to push for the delivery of the strategy.
 - Eating for Health initiatives must include the food service industry.
 - Agency policies must also take into account issues of affordability which are very relevant in NI.

The FSANI Response to 'Fit 'Futures'

10. Mrs Maria Jennings presented key areas of potential FSA activity in relation to the newly published Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) Childhood Obesity Task Force report 'Fit Futures – Focus on Food, Activity and Young People'. The following was agreed:
 - Members expressed concern over the government time-scale target of 10 years to complete the project, although recognised that a range of political issues demand such a time-scale.
 - The evaluation of local work is critical to the success of Fit Futures. The Agency is encouraged to see the inclusion of Northern Ireland in the National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS) at the earliest opportunity.

- The Committee recognises that to halt the rise in obesity is an ambitious first step to improving the nation's health.
- It is hoped that the resources made available to the Fit Futures project will be effective and adequate.
- The Committee recognised that a champion for exercise is needed in the same way that Jamie Oliver was the champion for school meals.
- Partnership working between government bodies as well as work across the community (supplementing health schools initiative) will be key to the success of the Fit Futures project. Silo working will result in failure.

Meetings with Others

11. The Chair met with a number of stakeholders during the period. For details please see the Board Member Engagements paper number SO 06/06/04.

Future NIFAC meetings

12. The programme and provisional agenda for future meetings of the Committee is described below.

DATE	EVENT	POTENTIAL TOPICS
21 June 2006	Open meeting, FSANI offices, Belfast	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charging for Official Controls For Meat Inspection • Enforcement and audit frameworks • Food Premises Survey • HACCP
6 September 2006	Open meeting, FSANI offices, Belfast	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic Plan Theme – Food Safety • Consumer Engagement • Primary Production Update