

Appendix 1

Food Safety

Background Summary

This paper provides a summary of the work carried out by the Council to monitor and ensure food safety during 2022-2023.

In 2022-23 the Food Safety Unit continued to address challenges that remained from the Covid 19 pandemic. During the period between 2020 and 2021, normal working activities were significantly impacted due to public health and social distancing restrictions and temporary requirements for businesses to close, leading to a backlog within the inspection programmes. During and following the pandemic, the Food Standards Agency provided direction for all local authorities, including a recovery plan which set priorities for addressing this backlog. The recovery plan directed all activities until March 2023 and each local authority was expected to meet the specified targets within the designated timelines. Any local authority that was unable to meet the targets was required to inform the FSA to enable them to intervene and direct the delivery of official controls. Belfast City Council's food safety unit successfully met all milestones as laid out in the recovery plan.

The Council's Port Health service also carries out official controls on imported food arriving in Belfast Port. Since 31st December 2020 (the end of the transition period following the UK's exit from the EU), the Port Health service has operated on a 24/7 basis carrying out statutory documentary and physical checks on incoming food and food materials.

Protecting Consumers and Supporting Businesses

Visits to premises are an integral part of the Service and Council officers use them to support food businesses to understand and meet their legal obligations, and to ensure that food they supply is safe and meets compositional and labelling requirements. The visits are planned using a risk-based approach that targets resources to where they are needed most and to reduce the inspection burden on better businesses. The support provided by Council officers during such visits can be vital to sustain and protect businesses, particularly in the current financial climate.

Last year the food safety team carried out 1231 food hygiene inspections and 877 food standards inspections. The team achieved the key milestones and objectives for 2022/23 which were designed to focus interventions on the highest risk businesses, bringing these back into the routine inspection programme (624 food hygiene and 105 food standards). They were also able to carry out inspections from the backlog that had accumulated during the pandemic and as a result, significant progress has been made towards returning to normal inspection frequencies for the vast majority of businesses across the range of high, moderate and low risk categories.

During the 2022/23 year, in total the team carried out over 2900 visits, took 1184 food samples and responded to over 2250 requests for service.

The unit received 592 complaints about food or food premises. Of these, 100% of urgent complaints were responded to within a 1 working day target. 77% of food complaints were fully investigated and resolved within 8 weeks.

Food Hygiene Rating Scheme

The Food Hygiene Rating Act (NI) 2016 requires all food businesses within the scope of the scheme to display their food hygiene rating sticker in a prominent position where it can easily be seen by customers at all entrances to the premises. The rating is based on the level of food hygiene / safety compliance found at the time of the last inspection. The rating is also published on the Food Standards Agency's website: www.food.gov.uk/ratings.

The aim is to enable consumers to make informed choices as to where to eat based on the hygiene rating and the scheme encourages businesses to improve and maintain their hygiene standards. Currently 89% of our premises are rated 5 - very good, 4 - good or 3 - generally satisfactory.

We are aware that FSA plan to introduce new legislation requiring the mandatory online display of Food Hygiene Ratings at some point in the near future. This will present unique challenges to capture relevant data in order to make informed decisions on how best to implement and enforce any proposed requirements.

Imported food control – Port Health

Belfast Port is the only container shipping terminal in Northern Ireland receiving imports from countries around the world. It also remains Ireland's busiest ferry port, with arriving trade from GB ports. The Council supports the movement of food into NI by industry through the delivery of imported food controls. They are delivered from office and inspection facilities located within the harbour estate at Corry Place.

The current Port Health inspection facilities are approved by the EU for the importation and clearance of a range of high-risk foodstuffs, including fish and fish products and high-risk food not of animal origin. Last year we processed over 6000 pre-notified consignments of food. We also completed almost 9500 surveillance checks on consignments potentially containing food products that had not been pre-notified. Such consignments included foods from non-EU countries, including nuts and nut products, confectionary, curry products, fruit, rice and wine. These were inspected and examined for contaminants such as aflatoxins, excessive or non-permitted additives and pesticides. Many of these products have to be sampled at EU defined levels. The consignments are often detained until an acceptable result is received or in some cases if found to be unsatisfactory rejected (see enforcement below).

We also carried out documentary checks on almost 3000 composite products containing fish and other products of animal origin that sit under DAERA overall enforcement responsibility, carried out checks on approximately 35,000 Illegal Unreported and Unregulated Catch Certificate documents that accompany wild fish consignments.

The Port Health Unit also validates imports of organic foods from 3rd Countries from the rest of the world (non-EU), involving documentary and identity checks. Last year 567 organic consignments were validated including a number of bulk consignments.

Community Engagement and Good Relations

Our Food Safety and Port Health teams deliver a front-line service interacting with consumers and local businesses to protect our community and respond to any queries related to food safety. The Council carries out a number of initiatives to support ethnic communities and businesses. We continue to work with the large number of ethnic caterers in the city and will always make information available in a language which can be understood and, in accordance with Council policy, will continue to employ the services of interpreters where necessary.

Supporting the Local Economy

Food production, transport and sale at retail and catering establishments play an essential part in our local economy. Northern Ireland's food and drink processing sector accounted for £1,088 million of GVA for Northern Ireland in 2021¹, with over 25,000 employees, with many more in retail and catering sectors. Good quality, local and safe food has a key role to play in developing local tourism. The work of the Council helps to protect the reputation and maintain the standards of our local food industry. It is particularly important to support new businesses and we offer help to anyone thinking about starting a food business. We intend to continue with such supporting activities to assist local businesses in providing safe food.

With the emergence from the pandemic the City was successful in once again attracting a number of high-profile events along with Maritime Weekender, Planet Love, Woodvale Festival, Oktoberfest, The Base, Dockside Festival, Belsonic, Feile, Christmas Continental Market and St Patrick's Day celebratory events. These events are vital to promoting the city, tourism and the local economy. We will continue to work closely with the events team in the council and the event organisers to ensure these events are a success and are safely managed.

The UK's exit from the European Union and the NI Protocol has placed significant additional duties on the Port Health service, applying food import controls on a range of products arriving into Belfast Port from GB. Whilst there are significant challenges in this work, we continue to work with a range of stakeholders to ensure adequate systems are developed and resources put in place to facilitate the monitoring and checking of imports of high-risk foods, to health certify high risk food exports to the EU, and to ensure we capture and communicate information relating to unsafe and non-compliant food within the food chain.

Promoting Food Safety

Throughout the year we have used the council's website and social media to support FSA campaigns and to promote key food safety messages.

Food Allergen information

The council continues to prioritise and improve the provision of allergen information within food premises.

Recent high-profile allergen deaths have raised the public's awareness of this important area of our work. We continue to address any compliance issues raised through complaints or found at routine intervention visits through our graduated approach to enforcement and taking appropriate formal action where necessary to protect public health.

The UK government has given a commitment to improve allergen labelling and this has resulted in the new legislation for Pre-Packed for Direct Sale (PPDS) foods which came into force on 1 October 2021. This new legislation will require a diversion of Food Safety resources to support businesses and monitor compliance. We have agreed to prioritise resources to promoting the new requirements for PPDS. This work is being progressed in liaison with Safefood and FSA NI through multi-media initiatives. We visited 56 small to medium sized businesses in the butchery and bakery sectors to provide additional support in the area of PPDS. These businesses were identified as the most likely to develop into the PPDS market and would not necessarily have the resources to pay for consultancy services. We continue to utilise the NI Food Manager Group PPDS checklist, developed by Food

¹ DAERA, NI Agri Food Sector Key Statistics report Dec 2022

EHO's from the 11 District Councils, where appropriate to target specific advice to key businesses.

Preventing Food Fraud

Food fraud is committed when food is placed on the market with the aim of deliberately misleading the consumer. Food fraud becomes food crime when it is no longer carried out by individuals but becomes an organised activity perpetrated by groups. It is carried out for financial gain and there is evidence that Covid 19 and the current economic situation may be increasing its occurrence. Examples of food fraud that we have dealt with include misleading declarations of meat content in sausages and pies, alcohol substitution and inaccurate alcohol strength declarations and the substitution of cod with cheaper varieties of white fish. The Council continues to participate in the annual Europol-Interpol joint OPSON operation targeting food fraud. In 2022-23 the Council participated in a survey for Undeclared Allergens within Takeaway Meals, namely undeclared dairy product within meat from takeaway meals in which 3 out of 7 samples were found to be adulterated with milk; the 2 samples taken as part of the survey on meat speciation were found to be genuine.

We will continue to share intelligence and explore opportunities to work with other agencies to target food fraud and food crime. Our intelligence led food sampling program will be an essential element of this work. In 2022-23 we carried out specific intelligence led investigations, including the investigation of unregistered food businesses operating without approval.

Preventing Illness

A scientific review published in 2022 by the Food Standards Agency estimates there are around 2.4 million cases of foodborne illness every year in the UK. Whilst the majority of these go unreported, some can cause serious illness, permanent disability and in extreme cases death. The elderly and the young are particularly vulnerable. Food poisoning is estimated to cost a societal burden to the UK of up to £9 billion each year. As well as ensuring that businesses produce safe food, the Council also investigates cases of food poisoning to identify the source and prevent those who are ill from infecting others. We investigated 125 confirmed cases of food related infectious diseases last year as part of our MOU with the Public Health Agency; these were dealt with within 24 hours in 100% of cases. We also dealt with 159 alleged food poisoning complaints.

We provide advice, often aimed at the elderly and the young, to make the public aware of how to prepare food safely in the home.

Port Health staff continue to screen vessels and aircraft arriving in Belfast for illness and infectious diseases. We examined 100% of the Maritime Declarations of Health for all vessels arriving in Belfast Port to ensure compliance with International and UK health and hygiene requirements including food safety and control of infectious diseases. In total, 1,911 Maritime Declaration of Health documents were examined. 73 Ship Sanitation inspections were also carried out and certificates issued to the vessels.

The unit also routinely liaise with the Harbour Commission and business within the port to manage and to advise on public health nuisance i.e., waste attracting vermin. The Port Health team routinely met with Public Health Agency and Agents to manage COVID cases in vessels, crew changes and ensure agents / visiting vessels are aware of any COVID controls in Northern Ireland.

The port staff also liaise with Agri-Food Biosciences Institute to monitor disease vectors and invasive species such as mosquitos.

Promoting a Healthy Diet and Tackling Obesity

In Northern Ireland each year there are around 4,500 deaths from cancer and 3,700 from heart disease and circulatory conditions. Diet, especially excess saturated fat, salt and sugar is thought to play a role in about one third of all cancer and heart disease cases. In an effort to help tackle obesity and poor diet, officers have worked with local businesses on the Calorie Wise Project as well as product specific reformulation. The Covid 19 pandemic restricted progressing the Calorie Wise project. The Food Safety Unit has resumed this work and will continue to work with our partners in the FSA.

Enforcement

Our enforcement approach aims to provide support, advice and guidance to secure compliance. This approach has been successful with 87% of our total food businesses found on inspection to be broadly compliant with food hygiene legislation.

However, where businesses consistently fail to comply or present a serious threat to public health, it is important that the Council takes action to protect consumers. Last year the Council issued 467 written warnings requiring action and in 20 more serious cases formal enforcement sanctions were taken.

In 2022/2023 the team prosecuted 2 food business operators for serious food safety offences and 2 further prosecutions are pending with the Courts. 2 food business operators were issued with Cautions. The Food Business Operators pleaded guilty to a range of serious food safety offences, in particular failure to implement adequate traceability procedures, selling food not of the nature demanded, selling food past its use by date and failure to put in place adequate procedures to control pests.

During routine inspections 14 premises were found to have conditions that required immediate closure due to an imminent risk to health. These closures were due to pest infestations and the risk of contamination to food. The food business operators agreed to a voluntary closure undertaking, until the risks were deemed to be adequately controlled. A graduated approach to enforcement was used based on the merits of each case, some of which are under consideration for legal proceedings being instigated. In addition, the team is preparing a number of cases for formal enforcement action following other investigations which took place in 2022/23. The council's legal team is assisting with these.

In Port Health, the vast majority of imported food products arriving at Belfast Port were found to be compliant with legislative requirements, only a very small proportion of consignments required interventions. These included a small number of rejections due to significant failures in documentary, identity or physical checks on entry. A small number of illegally imported consignments were also identified as unfit – 23 seizure notices and condemnation warning notices were served, and 23 condemnation orders were issued by the Justice of the Peace under food safety legislation.