

Appendix 2

Food Safety and Port Health

Background Summary

This paper provides a summary of the work carried out by the Council to monitor and ensure food safety and to encourage healthier choices during 2016-2017.

Protecting Consumers and Supporting Businesses

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

Last year we implemented our food service plan and completed 86.5% of our planned hygiene intervention program and 88% of the Food Standards intervention program. These percentages are slightly below the previous year due to the demands caused by the introduction of the mandatory Food Hygiene Rating Scheme and new Food Information Regulations including a requirement for business to provide information on allergenic ingredients. During the year we carried out around 4750 visits to premises, took 1355 food samples and responded to over 1150 requests for service. The unit received 635 complaints about food or food premises, 97% of complaints were responded to within the 48 hours target, and 84% of food complaints were fully investigated and resolved within 8 weeks.

In October the Food Hygiene Rating Act (NI) 2016 came into force. This 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 its last inspection. The rating is also published on the Food Standards Agency's website 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 98% of our premises are rated 5 - very good, 4 - good or 3 - generally satisfactory, with only 1.5 % requiring improvement (rated 0, 1 or 2)

Within the City Council boundary is the Port of Belfast, which is one of the major ports in the United Kingdom.

About 60% of Northern Ireland's seaborne trade and a fifth of the entire island's is handled at the port which received over 6,000 ship visits last year. Belfast remains Ireland's busiest ferry port with almost 1.5 million passengers and crew and almost 0.5 million freight units. The Council supports this industry through the delivery of Port Health services from purpose built office and inspection facilities located within the harbour estate.

The Port Health facilities are approved by the EU for the importation and clearance of a range of high risk foodstuffs. Last year we examined 357 consignments and carried out 467 documentary checks of imported foods. Foods from non-EU countries, including nuts and nut products, confectionary, curry products, fruit, rice and wine were inspected and checked 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. Last year 9 containers were rejected including 3 containers which contained foods which were incorrectly labelled and were subsequently referred to the Inland Authority for action.

The Unit also validates imports of organic foods from 3rd Countries, involving documentary and identity checks. Last year 46 Organic consignments were validated.

Last year we inspected 554 ships arriving at the Port to ensure compliance with International and UK health and hygiene requirements including food safety and control of infectious diseases. 87 Ship Sanitation inspections were carried out and certificates issued to the vessels.

Community Engagement and Good Relations

Our Food and Port Health team deliver a front line service interacting with consumers and local businesses to protect our community and respond to any query 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 that 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. Food and drink accounts for £672 million of the GVA for Northern Ireland with the food sector as a major employer having almost 45,000 employees in Northern Ireland. 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 and assist those that have just opened. We held a range of workshops and events during 2016-2017 to support businesses, and advised 244 individuals on the requirements for opening a new food business. We delivered 2 seminars for Chinese food business operators advising on the mandatory FHRS scheme. We created an advisory leaflet on Food Supplements which was produced by the FSA. This leaflet was distributed to around 100 relevant businesses in Belfast to inform them of the food safety requirements relating to these products. We intend to continue with such supporting activities to assist local businesses in providing safe food.

Over recent years the City has been successful in attracting a number of high profile events including the Tall Ships, the World Police and Fire Games, the Giro D'Italia, along with annual concerts, markets and festivals. These events are vital to promoting the city,

tourism and the local economy. We work closely with event organisers to ensure these events are a success and are safely managed.

The Council website has been updated with improved information for anyone wishing to open a food business or for managing an existing business.

BREXIT poses a major challenges for the import and export of foods and we will be reviewing developments closely with a view to supporting exporting food business and importers to meet any additional food safety requirements. It is likely that additional checks and controls may be imposed to control the import and export of foods post BREXIT and these may place additional demands on Food Safety and Port Health.

Food Safety Week

In 2016 Northern Ireland Food Safety Week was launched on 4 July. This year's theme focused on using freezers to make food go further and therefore reduce food waste. The Council issued a press release, used its website along with social media and had leaflets available to promote the key messages throughout the week.

Preventing Illness

There are approximately 22,200 cases of food poisoning occurring annually in Northern Ireland. 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 the UK £1.5 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 90 confirmed cases of food related infectious diseases last year; these were dealt with within 24 hours in 100% of cases. We also dealt with 189 alleged food poisoning complaints...

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

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 organized activity perpetrated by groups. It is carried out for financial gain and there is evidence that the current economic situation may be increasing its occurrence. Recent examples of food fraud that we have dealt with include 'Premium wasabi powder' which was sampled and found to contain no wasabi, under declared meat content in various meat products. We continue to take surveillance samples for alcohol

substitution with cheaper alternatives, the watering down of alcoholic drinks and the substitution of a variety of fish including cod/whiting with cheaper varieties of white fish. This year, Belfast City Council took part in Operation Opson VI focusing on Food Supplements. This was a priority under the Food Standards Agency National Co-ordinated Sampling Programme 2016/17. Belfast co-ordinated and provided officer training to the 11 District Councils in Northern Ireland which were to be involved in the operation. Businesses were sent a letter and food supplements leaflet prior to the Opson VI operation with a follow up visit and assessment of labelling for compliance with Nutrition and Health Claims and Food Supplements Regulations. Sampling was also carried out. None of the product was found to be injurious to health however there were a number of labelling irregularities identified. Food supplements continue to be an area of significant work with a recent voluntary surrender and destruction of non-compliant products being removed from the market. Belfast City Council is currently carrying out a number of significant food fraud investigations relating to supplements.

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.

Promoting a Healthy Diet and Tackling Obesity

In Northern Ireland each year there are around 4,000 deaths from cancer and 3,000 from heart disease. 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 work with local businesses to ensure that the nutritional labeling of food is accurate so consumers can make informed choices about what they eat. The Council is also working with businesses to encourage them to improve the nutrient profile of their foods and to provide calorie information to consumers through work with Caterers on the MenuCal project.

Enforcement

Our enforcement approach aims to provide support, advice and guidance to secure compliance. This approach has been successful with 98% of our 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 1531 warning letters requiring action to be taken, 35 legal notices, and 2 voluntary closure undertakings. Furthermore 3 food businesses were successfully prosecuted.