

## **Appendix 1**

### **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 during 2021-2022. The Covid 19 pandemic significantly affected the normal working activities of the inland food safety unit. The inland unit was not fully operational until September 2020. In the period from March 2020 - September 2020 it operated on a priority basis and continued to respond to urgent and emergency food safety calls. During this time the unit was also called upon to provide assistance to the PHA contact tracing service and other priority sections within the council. The Food Standards Agency provided direction for all local authorities during the pandemic and has laid out a recovery plan to address the backlog of programmed food hygiene and standards inspections that accumulated as result of the cessation of normal duties. The plan directs all activities until March 2023 and each local authority is expected to meet the specified targets within the designated timelines. Any local authority that is unable to meet the targets is required to inform the FSA to enable them to intervene and direct the delivery of official controls. The food safety management team have a project plan in place to address the FSA's expectations, however it is dependent on having a full complement of appropriately authorised food safety officers.

The Port Health Unit now operates a 24 hours service with 4 teams working 12-hour shifts. The officers carry 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 help support the food businesses to understand and meet their legal obligations and to ensure that the food they supply is safe and meets compositional and labelling requirements. The visits were 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 completed 34% of our planned food hygiene intervention programme. We completed 36% of the food standards intervention programme.

These figures can largely be attributed to the Covid 19 pandemic and the Covid operating procedures that had to be introduced. A large backlog of interventions accumulated that created a significantly larger annual programme than usual. Another factor was the fact that significant resources had to be diverted away from routine activities to implement the NI Protocol at the Border Control Post in our Port Health Unit.

During the year we visited 1035 premises, took 1113 food samples and responded to around 2000 requests for service.

The unit received 525 complaints about food or food premises. 100% of urgent complaints were responded to within the 1 working day target. 79% of food complaints were fully investigated and resolved within 8 weeks.

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](http://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 95% of our premises are rated 5 - very good, 4 - good or 3 - generally satisfactory, with less than 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 70% of Northern Ireland's seaborne trade and a fifth of the entire island's is handled at the port which received over 2014 (source Belfast Harbour Port Management Information System) ship visits last year. Belfast remains Ireland's busiest ferry port with over 1.2 million passengers and crew and over 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 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 physically examined 380 food consignments. Foods from non-EU countries, including nuts and nut products, confectionary, curry products, fruit, rice and wine 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 123 high risk food consignments (CHED Ds), 3166 fish consignments (CHED Ps), and approximately 8,000 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, involving documentary and identity checks. Last year 988 organic consignments were validated including a number of bulk consignments.

Port Health staff continue to monitor Maritime Declaration of health documents by accessing Belfast Harbour's Port Management Information System. Staff monitor all vessels entering Belfast Port - 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, 2,014 Maritime Declaration of Health documents were examined. 108 Ship Sanitation inspections were also carried out and certificates issued to the vessels.

The unit 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 the 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.

### **Community Engagement and Good Relations**

Our Food Safety and Port Health team 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. 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. We intend to continue with such supporting activities to assist local businesses in providing safe food.

With the easing of covid restrictions the City had been 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.

### **Food Hygiene Rating Scheme**

Within 2022, the FSA plan to carry out wide-spread consultation on new legislation requiring the mandatory online display of Food Hygiene Ratings. This shall present unique challenges to capture relevant data in order to make informed decisions on how best to implement and enforce any proposed requirements.

### **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.

### **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 76

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 121 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.

### **Allergen information**

In 2017 all 11 councils in NI signed up to a two-year Strategy to improve the provision of allergen information at the point of sale. This strategy was completed March 2019. However, following a review, it was decided to extend the strategy into 2021. 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 shall utilise the NI Food Manager Group PPDS checklist 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 under declared meat content in various meat products 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 fake and substandard food and beverages, with the 11<sup>th</sup> Opson operation undertaken in 2021-2022 which targeted Vodka products. All samples taken within Belfast were found to be satisfactory and authentic.

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. We have carried out specific intelligence led investigations in 2021.

### **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 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. However the Food Safety Unit intends to resume this work when resources allow and will continue to work with our partners in the FSA. During 2021-2022 the Food

Safety unit promoted healthier options for businesses through the distribution of Cheesecake reformulation advisory leaflets and invitations to targeted businesses to attend a webinar event on Cheesecake reformulation. The unit also issued further advisory leaflets on promotion of Nutrition and Healthy Options to specifically targeted business categories such as Fish & Chip Shops, Pizza premises, Chinese cuisine, Italian cuisine, Indian cuisine.

## **Enforcement**

Our enforcement approach aims to provide support, advice and guidance to secure compliance. This approach has been successful with 95% 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 350 written warnings requiring action and in 5 more serious cases formal enforcement sanctions were taken.

The team prosecuted 2 business for food safety offences. The Food Business Operators pleaded guilty to a range of food safety offences in particular failure to implement adequate traceability procedures, selling food not of the nature demanded, and failure to put in place adequate procedures to controls pests.

A total of 5 premises agreed to close voluntarily due to conditions that were considered to be an imminent risk to health. In these cases, this was due to pest infestations and risk of contamination of food. 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 2021/22. 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 – 8 seizure notices and condemnation warning notices were served, and 8 condemnation orders were issued by the Justice of the Peace under food safety legislation.