

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.

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 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 the 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 99% of our planned intervention programme. We carried out over 4,700 visits to premises, took 1,543 food samples and responded to over 1,000 requests for service. The unit received 466 complaints about food or food premises and 87% of food complaints were fully investigated and resolved within 8 weeks.

On 6 June 2011 the Food Standards Agency, together with 18 Councils across Northern Ireland, including Belfast, launched the National Food Hygiene Rating Scheme. This scheme, which was developed by the FSA, replaced the pilot "Scores on the Doors Scheme" operated by Belfast City Council since June 2007. It is hoped this new scheme will continue to enable consumers to make informed choices and encourage businesses to improve hygiene standards.

The Council continues to provide Port Health facilities which are approved by the EU for the importation and clearance for a range of high risk foodstuffs. Last year we examined 247 consignments and carried out 361 documentary checks of imported foods. Foods from non-EU countries, including nuts and nut products, curry products, 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. The Unit also validates imports of organic foods from 3rd Countries, involving documentary and identity checks. Last year we also inspected 646 ships arriving at the Port to ensure compliance with International and UK health and hygiene requirements including food safety and control of infectious diseases.

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. The healthier Chinese menu project and Chinese master chef competition have targeted the biggest ethnic food sector in the city to promote hygiene and nutrition.

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 639 million of the GVA for Northern Ireland with the food sector as a major employer with 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 2011-2012 to support businesses, and advised 280 new businesses on the requirements for opening a food business. We intend to continue with such supporting activities to assist local businesses in providing safe food. In particular we intend to provide specialist seminars for butchers within the city.

The Council website has been updated with improved information for anyone wishing to open a food business or for managing an existing business. Last year we developed an online facility to enable food business operators to register their food businesses with us. The 2012 SOCITM "Better Connected – A snap shot of all local authority websites" report cited this facility as best practice in their "Sites that we recommend" section.

Within the City 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 5,500 ship visits last year. Belfast remains Ireland's busiest ferry port with over 1.3 million passengers and crew. Cargo tonnages through the port last year rose by over 7% following three years of decline. Improved freight vehicle traffic and container tonnages suggest that confidence in the local manufacturing and consumer sectors is recovering.

The Council supports this industry through the delivery of port health services from a purpose built office and inspection facilities located within the harbour estate.

Food Waste

Northern Ireland Food Safety Week will be launched on 11 June from the grounds of the City Hall by the Lord Mayor and the Minister for the Environment, the Health Minister has also been invited. This year's theme is "Food Safety on a Budget" and aims to help people keep food safe, make their budget go further and reduce food waste. Food Safety and Waste Management staff will participate in the event and the Council will use its website to promote the key messages throughout the week.

The food safety team have also supported Fair Share, a charity that re-directs surplus quality food to homeless charities which otherwise would end up in landfill. We are also working with colleagues in waste management to develop and pilot a "doggy bag" scheme to encourage consumers to take home leftover food from restaurants.

Preventing Illness

There are around 850,000 cases of food poisoning in the UK each year, with approximately 22,200 of these occurring in Northern Ireland. Some of these can cause serious illness and permanent disability, some types can kill. 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 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 63 notifications of food related infectious diseases; these were dealt with within 24 hours in 100% of cases. We also 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. It is carried out for financial gain and there is evidence that the current economic situation may be increasing its occurrence. Recent examples of major food fraud in the UK, including NI, have seen recycling of animal by-products back into the food chain, products incorrectly labelled as organic, lamb curry substituted with cheaper cuts of beef, and counterfeit wine. More localised cases have involved substitution of premium vodka with cheaper alternatives, the watering down of alcoholic drinks and the substitution of cod with cheaper varieties of white fish.

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 labelling 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.

Last year we provided formal "healthier food and special diet" training to 30 persons and plan to run additional courses in 2012-2013. In 2010-2011 we piloted a regional nutritional award in Belfast helping 10 food businesses to improve and assessing their progress against standard criteria. This pilot scheme is currently being evaluated, with a view to launching across Northern Ireland so that healthier choices may be more widely offered in future.

Enforcement

Our enforcement approach aims to provide support, advice and guidance to secure compliance. This approach has been successful with 89.8% 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 618 warning letters requiring action to be taken, 34 legal notices, 3 voluntary closure undertakings and 8 cautions. Furthermore 8 food businesses were successfully prosecuted: offences included unhygienic premises, out of date foods, lack of traceability of meat and substitution of inferior species. In addition the Council's Port Health Officers rejected 2 imported food consignments at the point of entry, 16 tonnes of Organic Flax seeds from Canada contaminated with rodents and 3.6 tonnes of Indian tea (at a value of £9,000) with residual levels of pesticide above the maximum limit which were destroyed. The rejection and destruction of such foods helps protect Public Health in Belfast and further afield.

External Monitoring

The DoE NI Local Government Division use a best value quality and performance matrix score to monitor and compare the performance of food safety services across councils. Last year the Council returned a triple A rating, the highest possible rating.

In 2011/12 the Port Health section of the Unit was audited by the Food Standards Agency with regard to import controls on Foods Not of Animal Origin. There were no non-conformances identified as a result of the audit and therefore an action plan was not deemed necessary. The Food Standards Agency highlighted Belfast City Council Port Health for Good Practice with regard to management practices and review of internal procedures.