

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 and to encourage informed healthier choices during 2018-2019.

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 meet 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 72% of our planned hygiene intervention programme, a reduction on the 92% completed the previous year. We completed 75% of the Food Standards Intervention programme a reduction on the 88% completed in the previous year.

These reductions can in part be attributed to staff changes and operational issues. Another factor is the fact that significant resources have had to be diverted away from routine activities to prepare and plan for BREXIT. We effectively prioritised our activities during the year to ensure 100% of our high risk hygiene interventions have been achieved.

During the year we carried out around 4452 visits to premises, took 1552 food samples and responded to around 1250 requests for service.

The unit received 675 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.

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 its 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 99% of our premises are rated 5 -very good, 4 - good or 3 - generally satisfactory, with less than 1%% requiring improvement (rated 0, 1 or 2).

Support was also offered to specific businesses by making them aware of and encouraging them to attend free FSA and Safefood training that was tailored to their business needs. These included a Shelf Life Workshop and training on Ice Cream Reformulation.

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 over 1.5 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 Port Health facilities are approved by the EU for the importation and clearance of a range of high risk foodstuffs. Last year we examined 85 consignments and carried out 257 documentary checks of imported foods. Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs use the inspection facility to examine 142 consignments of products of animal origin facilitated by our port health staff. . 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).

The Unit also validates imports of organic foods from 3rd Countries, involving documentary and identity checks. Last year 27 organic consignments were validated including a number of bulk consignments.

Last year we inspected 374 ships arriving at the Port to ensure compliance with International and UK health and hygiene requirements including food safety and control of infectious diseases. Included in these inspections was the monitoring and certification of the refit of the luxury cruise ship Azamara Pursuit at Belfast Port. In total 88 Ship Sanitation inspections were 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 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 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 which can be understood and, in accordance with Council policy, will continue to employ the services of interpreters where necessary.

Our food officers gave presentations to students in a number of our schools and attended various health fairs in local communities to explain our role in protecting public health and provided information and advice on food safety in the home.

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 provided information and advice to support a range of food businesses and supported new food premises investors following referrals from the council's Economic Development Unit. We worked with Invest Northern Ireland to develop a video case study on the Food Hygiene

Rating Scheme to demonstrate how businesses could attain a good food hygiene rating. Following a Council motion agreed to promote Dog Friendly premises we teamed up with Tourism Northern Ireland and Visit Belfast to provide food safety information to bars and restaurants who would like to offer 'Dog Friendly' facilities. Those premises that wish to participate in this voluntary scheme are signposted on the council's website. 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 along with the annual music festivals, Feile, Orangefest, Mela, Christmas Continental Market and council run seasonal events. 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.

BREXIT continues to pose a major challenges for the import and export of foods and we continue to work with a range of stakeholders to ensure adequate systems are in place to facilitate monitor and check imports of high risk foods, to health certify high risk food exports to the EU and to ensure capture and communication of information relating to unsafe and non-compliant food within the food chain.

Promoting Food Safety

In 2018 Northern Ireland Food Safety Week was launched on 4 June. Last year's theme focused on 'The people who protect your plate'. Our food safety officers were interviewed and filmed to discuss their role in protecting public health. These videos were promoted on the FSA's social media sites.

Officers also took part in the BBC programme The Defenders which aired in the morning and had over 1 million viewers. We were involved in two episodes – one covering our work in Port Health and one about the E. coli O157 outbreak which occurred in Belfast in 2012 and affected 300 people.

Throughout the year we have used the council's website and social media to support FSA campaigns and to promote the 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 99 confirmed cases of food related infectious diseases last year; these were dealt with within 24 hours in 100% of cases. We also dealt with 193 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.

Allergens information

In 2017 all 11 councils in NI signed up to a two year Strategy to improve provision of allergen information at point of sale. This strategy was completed in March 2019 and this is currently being reviewed, however, we will continue to prioritise ensuring the legally required allergen information is provided with food.

Recent high profile allergen deaths have raised the public's awareness of this important area of our work and last year we received more allergen complaints than in previous years. We continue to address any compliance issues raised through complaints or found at routine intervention visits through a graduated approach but did have to take enforcement action in 2018/19.

The UK government has given a commitment to improve allergen labelling and it is likely there will be a change in the legislation in 2019. This will require a diversion of Food Safety resources to support businesses and monitor compliance.

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 under declared meat content in various meat products and the substitution of cod with cheaper varieties of white fish which was discovered during our participation in OPSON VIII. OPSON is an annual Europol INTERPOL joint operation targeting fake and substandard food and beverages. We continue to take surveillance samples for alcohol substitution with cheaper alternatives and the watering down of alcoholic drinks.

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 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 and to provide calorie information to consumers through work with Caterers on the Calorie wise project. In efforts to target our work in this area we have participated in a regional sampling survey of scones for nutritional analysis of fats, salts and sugars. Scones were selected as they within the top 10 sources of sugar in our diet and they are frequently served at meetings and events. The results show that scones served in high street cafes can be very large in size. Basically, the bigger the scone, the higher it is in calories. This survey produced valuable information on the contribution scones makes to consumer's overall calorie intake, with one scone in the survey providing 30% of the recommended calorie intake for a male and 38% of the recommended calorie intake for a woman. We intend to follow these up with advice to the business on how to reformulate these products and encourage smaller portion sizes. As part of our in-house sampling surveys we have sampled a range of tray bakes for nutritional analysis and intend to follow-up with advice to businesses. This work supports the government's sugar reduction and reformulation strategy to tackle obesity. We are also

working with the FSA to pilot work towards the introduction of minimum nutritional standards across Councils food activities including the Atrium staff canteen.

Enforcement

Our enforcement approach aims to provide support, advice and guidance to secure compliance. This approach has been successful with 99% 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 1222 written warnings requiring action and in more serious cases formal enforcement sanctions were taken.

The team prosecuted 1 business for food safety offences. The Food Business Operator pleaded guilty to 6 food hygiene offences including failure to protect food from contamination likely to render it unfit for human consumption and failure to put in place adequate procedures to control pests.

3 cautions were issued to businesses. In one case the offence related to an incorrectly labelled product which a large retailer failed to withdraw from sale. The other 2 cautions were issued to a hotel and a takeaway for poor food hygiene practices.

A total of 4 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. As voluntary procedures were used in these cases and there was full co-operation from the food business operators two of the premises did not warrant further enforcement action and the other two premises will have follow up formal action taken with the food business operators.

In addition, the team is preparing a number of cases for formal enforcement action following investigations which took place in 2018/19. The council's legal team is assisting with these.

From October 2016 under the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme it has been a requirement for businesses to display their rating sticker where people buy or eat food. During the year the food safety team have issued 6 fixed penalty notices on food business operators that failed to display a valid food hygiene rating sticker.

In the Port Health Unit,

- 8 Containers were rejected including 4 containers which contained foods which were incorrectly labelled and were subsequently referred to the Inland Authority for action.
- 7 Notices were served under Official Feed & Food Controls Regulations (NI) 2009 including detention, destruction and re-dispatch.
- 1 Detention notice was issued under organics.

