

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 2020-2021. 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 27% of our planned food hygiene intervention programme. We completed 29% of the food standards intervention programme.

These figures can largely be attributed to the Covid 19 pandemic and clearly some relevant business not being operational for a substantial period and then on the recovery of services the Covid operating procedures that had to be introduced as a result of regulation and guidance. 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 carried out 1260 visits to premises, took 404 food samples and responded to around 1100 requests for service.

The unit received 463 complaints about food or food premises. 100% of urgent complaints were responded to within the 1 working day target. 83% 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.

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).

Support was also offered to specific businesses by making them aware of and encouraging them to attend free FSA and DAERA online training that was tailored to their business needs and included webinars on EU exit.

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 trade is handled at the port which received over 6,000 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 Port Health facilities are approved by the EU for the importation and clearance of a range of high-risk foodstuffs. Last year we examined 158 consignments and carried out 325 documentary checks of imported foods. Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs used the inspection facility to examine 223 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 Port Health Unit also validates imports of organic foods from 3rd Countries, involving documentary and identity checks. Last year 84 organic consignments were validated including a number of bulk consignments.

Last year the port was facilitated access to the harbours Port Management Information System which allows staff to monitor all vessels entering Belfast Port and review their Maritime Declaration of health and ship sanitation information. 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 86 Ship Sanitation inspections were carried out and certificates issued to the vessels.

The unit routinely liaise with the Harbour Commission and businesses 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

At the beginning of the Covid 19 pandemic food safety officers provided advice and assistance to community groups and other local non-statutory bodies involved in the distribution of food to vulnerable members of the community. The team were able to provide verbal and written information with food safety advice specific to the nature of these activities.

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.

Prior to the Covid 19 pandemic the City had 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. Whilst these events are vital to promoting the city, tourism and the local economy they do have an impact as new and additional work for the Food safety team. 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 NEW 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 the key food safety messages. This has been used particularly to provide Covid advice for food businesses as well as advice on reopening after a period of temporary closure.

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 74 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 94 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.

Allergens 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 and to continue to prioritise and improve the provision of allergen information thereby 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. 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 2019-2020.

The UK government has given a commitment to improve allergen labelling and this has resulted in the new legislation for 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.

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 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 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 have worked with local businesses on the Calorie Wise Project as well as product specific reformulation. The Covid 19 pandemic restricted further progress in this area but the Food Safety Unit intends to resume this work when resources allow 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 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 101

written warnings requiring action and in 6 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 hygiene offences including failure to display a valid Food hygiene rating sticker, failure to protect food from contamination likely to render it unfit for human consumption and failure to put in place adequate procedures to controls pests.

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 of the premises did not warrant further enforcement action.

In addition, the team is preparing a number of cases for formal enforcement action following investigations which took place in 2020/21. The council's legal team is assisting with these.

In the Port Health Unit,

- 6 Containers were rejected for failing either identity or physical checks on entry e.g. discrepancy in Official certification not matching product.
- 5 Notices were served under Official Feed & Food Controls Regulations (NI) 2009 including detention, destruction and re-dispatch.
- 1 Notice was served under Trade in Animals and Related Products Regulations 2011.