



Food & Drink

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A Taste of the Good Life

Tina Calder

According to recent statistics released by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development the Northern Ireland Food & Drink processing sector figures for turnover and exports are on the increase.

Contributing to these positive statistics is the membership body of the Northern Ireland Food & Drink Association that currently represents 80 percent of the country's manufacturing in the sector.

The data, released at the end of July this year, found that the value of sales in the food and drink processing sector increased by 2.3 percent from £2.525million in 2005 to £2.583million in 2006 with estimates in excess of £2.7million for 2007.

The Northern Ireland Food & Drink Association (NIFDA) is a voluntary organisation whose purpose is to help Northern Ireland food and beverage companies compete successfully and to represent and promote their interests. Established to provide services to enhance, promote, inform, educate and develop member businesses its role is to enter into partnerships with existing providers, associations and companies to assist in improving the competitiveness of the industry.

Michael Bell, Executive Director of NIFDA, said "I have been working to support local food and drink for 25 years. A number of years ago I was told that food and drink was a sunset industry. We have proved our critics wrong, but much more than this, exports continue to grow strongly and our industry is the heart of the Northern Ireland economy.

"Our industry is world class and the Taste Of Ulster is something that is increasingly being enjoyed worldwide.

He added that: "With our clean green land, very high quality raw materials from our colleagues in farming and world class production facilities, it's a recipe for success."

While employment in the sector remains generally steady, recently NIFDA have been calling on the Government to

Michael Bell, Executive Director of NIFDA,



assist their members with job shortages in the meat processing sector.

With a lack of skilled workers hitting the industry hard Michael said the problem is a need for a short term supply of skilled workers.

"The meat companies have tried very, very hard here, in Britain and in the EU and they can't get the required workforce" he added.

"There is a current shortage of skilled butchers in the sector that the industry is lobbying about. It's up to 400 jobs currently, that's skilled and semi-skilled".

In recent months the number of migrant workers returning home has increased, particularly within the Polish community, many of whom work in the food and drink industry.

The current weakened pound is an important factor for many immigrants, and with many of their home countries

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improving economically, there are better opportunities if they leave Northern Ireland.

As a result Michael, on behalf of NIFDA is campaigning for a work permit scheme to allow non-EU workers to be employed in this sector to fill the labour shortage.

He said: "We've been in extensive

discussions with the Minister, we've met the Migration Advisory Committee and we've lobbied hard for that particular skill to be added to the list, which is the new rules and procedures to allow us to employ these people.

"Our preferred route is to employ local people if we can get them. I think part of the reason why we've been lobbying the Minister and Westminster is that we need to do more to make people aware there are jobs out there for youngsters today and there is training available.

"And I think we need to be clear, these jobs are typically twice national minimum wage, these are not poorly paid jobs".

Recently the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit published a report called Food Matters Towards a Strategy For The 21st Century. The aim of the report was to review the main trends in food production and consumption in the UK and to analyse the implications of those trends for the economy, society and the environment among other objectives.

The Northern Ireland Food & Drink Association was the only representative body for manufacturers who contributed to the report from Northern Ireland.

This report outlined the changes in consumer food culture which included a desire for healthier food, a higher interest in the provenance of food and an increased desire for eating out of the home.

For Michael and the NIFDA team these are all important issues when bringing messages to the public.

He explained: "NIFDA's vision is an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable food industry and we are working hard with government to achieve this on behalf of all our members.

"Another aim of the organisation is to work hard with the public to encourage them to support local food, and eat more healthy.

"People are becoming more aware of the real costs of cheap food and drink. Local food that is socially, economically and environmentally sustainable is the only sensible way forward and more and more people are beginning to realise that".

In 2004 the Northern Ireland Food &



Drink Association merged with Taste Of Ulster to develop and celebrate excellence in local cuisine.

"Our aim is to promote good restaurants, hotels and other eating places as well as quality producers who we believe offer excellence in local food, service and authentic innovative Ulster cuisine" said Michael.

Membership of the most recent Taste Of Ulster guide, published in June this year, grew by 81 per cent.

These members sign up to a Charter asking them to source local foods as much as possible and through the guide consumers can be confident of what they are being served when they sit down to a meal anywhere in Northern Ireland.

Michael added: "I'm delighted that this year many more establishments have risen to the challenge and the increase in membership is remarkable.

"All members must pass a thorough independent inspection each year with the pass mark raised by ten percent from last year.

"I believe this shows that Taste Of Ulster deserves the strong consumer credibility it enjoys".