



### INTRODUCTION

Food allergen awareness for food businesses can be a complex area. In a drive to increase the knowledge and understanding of effective management of the fourteen food allergens, Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council Environmental Health Food Safety Team produced a short informative video for local food businesses as part of an allergen seminar, which was included as a training tool for businesses. The Food Safety team wrote the script to highlight potential issues for both the allergen sufferer and the food business operator and officers featured in the production with the emphasis on cross contamination and practices that may have the potential to affect the allergy sufferer.

#### Brief and objectives

The objective of the project was to reduce the level A food allergen compliance strategy was undertaken by Food Safety Team environmental health officers from April 2017 to December 2018, which was designed to assist food businesses with the compliance of allergen information requirements contained within The Food Information Regulations (NI) 2014. Businesses who handle food and often deal with allergen free requests were visited as part of the initiative.

#### Rationale

29% of businesses visited in the Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council region were found to be in some way non-compliant with allergen labelling protocol at the time of the visits, which the Food Safety Team found to be unacceptably high.

#### Strategy

As part of the initiative, officers compared the already completed allergen matrix at food outlets (if this was the chosen method of communication) with the food packaging for accuracy, to ensure the correct allergen information was being provided to the consumer. A mystery shopper sampling survey was undertaken with nineteen samples declared free from milk and eggs being purchased. The Public Analyst examined and returned six samples as unsatisfactory, where three samples exhibited low level contamination consistent with cross-contamination, while the other three samples had significant levels of egg or milk, which could have a significant health impact on consumers. The findings of the interventions and the sampling results indicated a lack of food handler understanding when dealing with allergen free requests. Officers found that often no checks of the food matrix or packaging took place at the time of sale. For instance, butter or mayonnaise was evident in foods that were meant to be milk and egg free, cheese was added to other milk free ingredients and boards were not cleaned. Given the observations of officers during the interventions and sampling visits, the team officers agreed that a visual training tool would benefit businesses in addition to an information seminar to build allergen compliance.



### Implementation

The Food Safety Team developed a **short informative video** demonstrating a typical deli counter which highlighted the issues identified. The video would be used to educate food handlers on common errors and achieve best practice. The script content and subsequent acting was carried out by members of the food team. An allergen seminar was also held for food businesses in April 2019, with 150 delegates attending. The seminar outlined the:

- legislative and business responsibilities
- the findings of the intervention visits and test sampling
- information on how to comply with allergen labelling requirements.

The seminar aimed to give an all-round perspective on allergen compliance by including presentations from a nut allergy sufferer, a chef's perspective and the training video.

### Measurement and evaluation

Food Safety team members have already seen increased compliance rates during these allergen intervention visits and the team have noted an increase in contact from businesses requesting additional advice on the matter of food allergens. Evaluation indicated that 70% of delegates felt the seminar enhanced their knowledge and understanding of allergen controls. Very positive feedback was received for the video, with typical responses being along the lines of: "The video detailed exactly what and where it can go wrong." The video clip will be made available to businesses on the Council's YouTube channel in the future. A further short clip will be added, which will focus on front of house staff and dialogue with customers.