



Minutes of the 167th meeting of the **safefood** Advisory Board

Held on Thursday, 14 December 2023 at 10:30am

safefood, Dublin office.

Present: in person

Dr Eddie Rooney (ER) (Chair)

Ms Teresa Canavan (TC)

Mr Alex Attwood (AA)

Prof Elizabeth Keane (EK)

Present: Virtually: none

In attendance: in person

Dr Gary A. Kearney, Interim Chief Executive (GK)

Ms Patricia Fitzgerald, Director Corporate Operations (PF)

Ms Fiona Gilligan, Director Communications (FG)

Ms Trish Twohig, Director Food Safety (TTw)

Dr Aileen McGloin, Director Nutrition (AMcG)

Ms Alison Dries (AD) Secretariat

Apologies:

Dr Kenneth McKenzie (KMck)

Mr Alan Lewis (AL)

Ms Irene Collins (IC)

Mr Damien McCallion (DMcC)

1. Introduction and apologies

Noted: The Chair welcomed members of the Advisory Board to the meeting and thanked all for travelling.

2. Conflicts of interest

Noted: The Chair asked members if there were any conflicts of interest relating to the agenda. No conflicts of interest were raised.

3. Minutes of meeting held on Thursday, 2 November 2023.

Approved: The Chair asked members if they were happy to approve the minutes of the previous meeting which were circulated in advance. No issues were raised, and the minutes were approved.

Proposed: EK

Seconded: TC

4. Matters arising from the minutes

Noted: Carried forward from February Minutes - point 5 of the previous minutes (December 2022) 'invite a member of the FSAI reformulation of food products taskforce to present at a meeting at a suitable date in the future'. Nuala Collins, Food Safety Authority of Ireland will present at today's meeting.

5. Financial Report

Noted: PF presented the financial report for the 11-month period January to November 2023. **safefood** has currently spent 80% of its total funding and is forecasting an underspend this year in the region of €250k due to difficulties in completing certain projects before the end of the year. **safefood** has requested an increased budget for 2024 in its Corporate Plan 2023-2025. However, in the absence of the NSMC to approve this, is retaining its core budget at €7.48 million (2016 level). The Department of Health Ireland have offered some additional funds in 2024 totalling €274k for development of **safefood**'s Food Environment programme and have indicated this does not affect the 70/30 ratio.

6. Update from the Board's Audit and Risk Committee (ARC)

Noted: AA and EK provided an update from the Audit and Risk Committee meeting held on 14 November 2023.

- **safefood** updated its Risk Policy and re-assessed its risk appetite. While there is a low-risk appetite in areas of compliance/finance/ICT security, **safefood** is willing to have moderate risk in areas that require creativity (i.e. communications projects & campaigns).
- The new risk register software is now fully integrated by **safefood**. The ARC received a full risk register in addition to a top 20 risk report. AA reported the new register to be usefully detailed and comprehensive.
- The key risks relate to staffing – ongoing slow progress in having posts regraded and in addressing the two in situ posts and challenges associated with retaining experienced staff who are on the top level of their pay scales.
- The 2023 ARC effectiveness self-review included completing the comprehensive DPENDR checklist and the ARC members are satisfied with the outcome of this review.
- FG joined the ARC meeting to outline the challenges and key risks faced by the Communications Directorate (staffing and retention, Irish language obligations, procurement challenges and opportunities and risks posed by AI).
- Members reviewed the Draft Business Plan for 2024 and expressed surprise at static budget levels since 2016 despite mounting inflationary pressures and noted that this is an unfavourable position to be in.

Noted: The Chair thanked AA and EK for their comprehensive report to the Advisory Board and informed the key importance of this link between the ARC and the Advisory Board. The Chair suggested that the Risk Register should be factored into **safefood**'s work without being an administrative imposed burden. The Chair agreed static funding levels are a concern, which can potentially get to the stage where budget is absorbed with operational costs of running **safefood** with diminished funding available for programmes.

Noted: The CEO advised that knowledge and awareness of risk and potential mitigation processes should lie across the whole staff and has requested Directors to table risk management with their teams every quarter.

7. Food Reformulation

Noted: Nuala Collins, lead of the Food Reformulation Taskforce with the Food Safety Authority of Ireland joined the meeting to present on the topic 'Insights from the implementation of the food reformulation programme in Ireland'.

- In 2016 the Department of Health Ireland launched the 'Obesity policy and action plan to address the underlying causes of obesity'. Following on from this 'A roadmap for food product reformulation in Ireland' was published in 2021 with an aim to assist the food industry to reduce nutrients which are known to contribute to overweight and obesity levels as well as other health issues such as cardiovascular disease, stroke, and high blood pressure.
- Food reformulation means improving the nutritional content of commonly consumed processed foods and drinks by reducing calories and target nutrients such as saturated fat, salt, and sugar.
- The roadmap documents the following reformulation targets for Ireland for processed foods, reductions of 20% sugar, 10% saturated fat, 10% salt and 20% calories.
- Several **safefood** reports have assisted the taskforce such as 'Attitudes of the public towards policies to address obesity' published in 2020 which showed a high level of support for improvement of nutritional content of processed packaged foods.
- Reformulation of food products at present is voluntary. The roadmap is designed to start the process and conversation.

Noted: The Chair thanked Nuala for her informative presentation and opened to the floor for questions / discussion which is summarised below

- Food reformulation is expensive and challenging
- Education and consumer awareness is important
- The role **safefood** plays in supporting the messaging is important.

- The food reformulation taskforce is a new concept and the first to have dedicated human resources and finances ringfenced to the project.

8. Chief Executive Officers report

Noted: The Chief Executive Officer's report detailed **safefood's** activity since the last Board meeting on 2 November. The report was circulated to members prior to the meeting and taken as read. The CEO invited colleagues to brief on the following items.

- Members of **safefood** senior management met with both Sponsor Departments in Belfast on 16 November. Issues discussed included the 2022 Financial Memorandum, the CEO's update/report, staffing issues, 2023 Expected out turn/drawdown requests, Business Plan 2024, Advisory Board vacancies, Advisory Committee vacancies and the Windsor Agreement.
- Publicity for the Christmas food safety campaign began on 6 December. The Food Safety Directorate have been busy doing PR and a full evaluation of the campaign will be available in January.
- Three core message areas focused on this year are:
 - Encourage home cooks to use a meat thermometer to check turkey is safely cooked
 - Motivate home cooks to use our Turkey cooking time calculator which is now updated to include times for turkey crowns (being cooked by almost half of people in NI according to our recent research)
 - Encourage home cooks to use our Christmas dinner planner to help calculate how much food to buy for Christmas dinner and avoid food waste
- The All-island Obesity Action forum hosted its second event of the year titled 'Shaping Healthier Food Environments' on the 21 November in Belfast. AA attended the event and advised that 'not a word was wasted at the action orientated event.'
- **safefood** in association with the British Dietetic Association delivered weight stigma training to dietitians.
- **safefood** hosted a forum for higher grade Environmental Health Officers from Ireland and Northern Ireland in Dundalk in November designed to

encourage cross border working and building relationships. This was the first event of its kind and brought together 31 delegates from across the island of Ireland to network, discuss ongoing challenges in both jurisdictions and areas for collaboration.

Noted: The Chair thanked all contributors to the report and opened to the floor for discussion.

- TC congratulated **safefood** on the Department of Health Ireland's agreement to progress the request for four of the six posts to be regraded (all four to HEO level). GK informed the official notification process is not yet complete but is a step in the right direction which will provide added stability for the organisation.
- TC asked if there was any update on the appointment of a new **safefood** Advisory Committee. GK informed that **safefood** will review options on this in February 2024.

9. Reflections on the cross-border working piece at the November AB meeting

Noted: Following on from the facilitated discussion on **safefood**'s North South working by Tommie Gorman at the November meeting in Armagh, Advisory Board members were invited to give further feedback on this topic which is summarised as follows.

- It was useful to hear practical examples of **safefood**'s North South working from the Nutrition and Food Safety Directorates.
- Being mindful of the difference between true cross border and work either side of the border, for example holding two workshops in Ireland and two in Northern Ireland is not cross border working.
- Need to elaborate on **safefood**'s partnership approach at a high strategic level.
- Consider and define **safefood**'s interpretation of North South and cross border.
- Selling point can be community work.

- The main lead of peace process applicants is District Councils – **safefood** could potentially partner with them on a project.

Agreed: A follow-up / brainstorming session on **safefood**'s North South working is required.

10. Tour de table

Noted: GK informed that **safefood** representatives will meet with Hildegard Naughton, TD Minister of State for Public Health, Well Being and National Drugs Strategy on 24 January 2024.

11. AOB

Noted: Provisional meeting dates for 2024 were circulated in advanced of the meeting. The Chair asked members to review the dates and revert to AD with any difficulties otherwise the dates would be taken as agreed.

Noted: The Chair on behalf of the Board wished IC well and a speedy recovery.

Noted: The Chair wished the Board and **safefood** staff a happy Christmas and best wishes for the New Year.

12. Meeting of Advisory Board members – without Executive present

Noted: The Chair informed that this session would not proceed today and that he would conduct one-to-one phone calls with Board members in the coming weeks to catch up.