



Minutes of the 166th meeting of the **safefood** Advisory Board

Held on Thursday, 2 November 2023 at 9:30am

North South Ministerial Council, Armagh

Present: in person

Dr Eddie Rooney (ER) (Chair)

Dr Kenneth McKenzie (KMck)

Ms Teresa Canavan (TC)

Ms Irene Collins (IC)

Mr Alex Attwood (AA)

Mr Alan Lewis (AL)

Present: Virtually

Prof Elizabeth Keane (EK)

Mr Damien McCallion (DMcC) (Vice-Chair) (10:21)

In attendance: in person

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

Ms Patricia Fitzgerald, Director Corporate Operations (PF)

Ms Trish Twohig, Director Food Safety (TTw)

Dr Aileen McGloin, Director Nutrition (AMcG)

Dr Linda Gordon, Chief Specialist Food Safety

Ms Joana da Silva, Chief Specialist in Nutrition

Mr Dermot Moriarty, Communications Manager

Ms Aoife O'Reilly, Communications Manager – Digital and Health

Ms Alison Dries (AD) Secretariat

Tommie Gorman for agenda item 9 Only

Apologies: none

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, 7 September 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: KMckK

Seconded: IC

4. Matters arising from the minutes

Action: 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. The Chair suggested it is timely to action this presentation at the next meeting and the CEO agreed to contact the FSAI.

5. Financial Report

Noted: PF presented the financial report for the first nine months of 2023 (January to September). **safefood**'s expenditure to date is slightly behind budget representing 62% of the overall budget despite being 75% through the year. This is a normal spending pattern for **safefood** as there is still a lot of activity planned for Q4 for example the Christmas campaign and forecasts indicate that **safefood** will spend its full budget for the year.

6. Chief Executive Officers report

Noted: The Chief Executive Officer's report detailed **safefood's** activity since the last Board meeting on 7 September. The report was circulated to members prior to the meeting and taken as read. The CEO invited colleagues to brief on the following items.

- **safefood** continues to wait on a decision and action from the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan and Reform (PER) regarding a business case submitted by the CEO last October to regrade several critical positions within the organisation. The CEO advised that the sponsor departments had confirmed their support for his regrading requests. The CEO and Board reported their disappointment in the length of time the matter is taking especially since the CEO's requests are backed by the Sponsor Departments.
- **safefood** is finalising its 2024 Business Plan which is tabled for discussion at a meeting with the Sponsor Departments in two weeks.
- The CEO advised that the term of two Advisory Board members expired in October 2023. PF clarified that membership of the Board now stands at eight which is the minimum specified under the British Irish Agreement Act, 1999. The sponsor departments and NSMC Secretariat had clarified that, in the absence of the North South Ministerial Council, appointments/reappointments of Members cannot be made. This absence also affects **safefood's** Advisory Committee which has ceased operating due to the inability to appoint/reappoint members. The Chair on behalf of Board members and **safefood** thanked EK as Chair of the Advisory Committee and Board members Maeve Henchion and Sinead McCarthy for their contributions.
- The meat thermometer Christmas campaign will launch on 11 December and will run until just after Christmas.
- An advertising campaign to promote '**safefood** for Business', a free online training programme in basic food safety for small food businesses in food service, catering, retail and manufacturing, will launch next week across T.V. radio and digital.
- **safefood** hosted the first all-island Community Food event in September in Newry. The event brought together those working in similar community

programmes across the island of Ireland to share experiences and learnings. TC represented the Board at the event and said that the event was well attended, showcased a good variety of presentations, lots of networking took place and there was a sense of wanting to collaborate. TC referred to 'The Breaker Breaker haulage charity' which was set up to address mental health and wellbeing of hauliers as a possible partner/audience to **safefood**. AMcG informed that **safefood** has previously run a programme for this industry titled 'Get your life in Gear'.

- Website traffic almost doubled in the period August to October compared to the same period last year. This is due to search engine optimisation work and rewriting content to answer questions people are asking.
- The 'Transform your Trolley' programme launched on 21 September, the funding method has been restructured which offers the programme security for the next three years providing a steady footing for **safefood** and participants across Northern Ireland.
- **safefood**'s Knowledge Network will host the first of its kind 'Environmental Health Services Forum' on 16 and 17 November. The aim of the event is to bring together Environmental Health officers from both jurisdictions to discuss challenges experienced and areas for collaboration and partnership in the future.
- Following a research tender call in March for three projects, two have come to a successful outcome with contract negotiations taking place. Evaluation of tender responses for the third project were unsuccessful and the project will be put on hold.

7. Tour de table

Noted: AA thanked the CEO and staff for a comprehensive and thorough report. Regarding the discussion on hauliers, AA informed that Nicola Mallon, Director of Policy at the trade organisation 'Logistic UK', would be interested in **safefood**'s project 'Get your life in gear'.

Action: **safefood** to circulate 'Get your life in Gear' to Board members.

Noted: AA informed that the British Government have changed regulations regarding appointment processes which shows more flexibility in favour of internal management

Action: AA to send a note on the above to the CEO and Chair.

Noted: KMck asked about strategic input from Sponsor Departments. A general detailed guidance document is issued by the Department of Finance (NI) and DPENDPR yearly to all North-South Bodies. All CEO reports, Business Plans, Corporate Plans and quarterly business updates are issued to the Sponsor Departments as well as regular accountability meetings.

Noted: IC asked if the quorum for Advisory Board meetings requires alteration due to the loss of two members?

Noted: PF clarified that the revised Code of Conduct addressed this issue.

Noted: EK informed it would be a shame if the advice and expertise of the **safefood** Advisory Committee were lost and enquired if there is any way to bring together people to offer advice? External skilled experts can be a tremendous asset to the organisation.

Noted: EK noted **safefood**'s strong compliance culture but worried that **safefood** is sufficiently resourced to look after the 'softer' HR staff issues.

Noted: The CEO advised that CEOs of all North South bodies were asked to document their shared resourcing issues. A document, sent to the NSMC Joint Secretariat, explored shared issues regarding budgets and funding models, staff anomalies, structures and reviews, as well as accountability models.

Noted: The CEO advised that 2024 is the 25th anniversary of the North South bodies. The Centre for Cross Border Studies is representing the six bodies to secure funding to complete a programme of work during 2024 including a research project to highlight the value and benefit to communities across the island over the last 25 years.

Noted: AA informed it is very difficult for North South Bodies to promote themselves and their work as historically the bodies were politically downgraded.

Noted: KMcK referenced the value of the Community Food Initiative Programme in building capacity in communities of deprivation. **safefood**'s contribution is clear and valuable and to personally hear that fact from people who are known to be cynical of government bodies is encouraging.

8. Discussion on new childhood obesity campaign

Noted: An information and discussion paper were circulated in advance of the meeting and taken as read.

Noted: DM and AMcG briefed on the planned direction of the new childhood obesity campaign and facilitated a discussion with Board members.

Qualitative research by **safefood** showed parents consider their child's weight to be their sole responsibility. **safefood** would like parents to notice their food environment and see that there is a wider problem which cannot be tackled by themselves. The direction of the new campaign is essentially asking parents to call for action or intervention from others (government, industry, retailers etc) to demand changes to the food environment. The following many comments from Board members were recorded.

- It is interesting that parents see the problem as their responsibility and therefore they may reject the campaign.
- Use caution with the word 'disempowering' as it can be discouraging if you think there is a conspiracy against you.
- Consider policy enforcement in two jurisdictions.
- Which area will you target, policy, enforcement, retail etc.?
- Planning laws and environment has not been tackled to date.
- Football driven by businesses is not always in the best interest of children.
- Be careful how much you ask sports clubs to do. Social organisations are presently being tasked well beyond their remit.

- Be smart and bring people with you, not about alienating or conspiring.
- Language is important.
- The campaign is trying to make society better.
- The work of Eco schools in NI may be a template on bringing about change.
- Can we influence the food environment in the new children's hospital in Dublin as it has not opened yet. A blank canvas is easier to work with than trying to implement corrective change.
- Policies relating to or protecting children are more readily accepted.
- The FSA NI are due to evaluate the vending policy in healthcare setting in March.
- Campaign may align with other stakeholder's work.
 - CAWT's obesity prevention programme 'Up4it'
 - FSAI and FSA NI calories on menus work
 - Reformulation
- Look at people's assembly, perspective from others in society.
- Complex in terms of employment – many employed in food sector.
- Increase knowledge, don't get lost in the problem.

The Chair thanked all for their contributions and insight and the Board looks forward to seeing the direction of the campaign.

9. North South working

Noted: The Chair Welcomed Mr Tommie Gorman, former RTE correspondent in Northern Ireland for over 20 years, to facilitate a discussion on North South working.

Noted: Tommie advised that **safefood** was set up based on structural / political reasons 25 years ago and asked Board members to consider where they see the organisation going in the future.

Noted: Board members discussed areas for growth for example

- The opportunity to apply for funding potentially through the PEACE grant funding,
- How to better leverage community work,
- More extensive working on the ground particularly in the Border region,

- Seeking fresh and inventive ways to connect with people - north and south,
- Enhancing **safefood**'s profile in Northern Ireland,
- Balancing the organisation's legislative public health mandate with effective and sustainable cross-border working required from the Belfast Agreement,
- Working with local governments who are more active in communities.

Noted: The Chair thanked Tommie for facilitating a much-needed thought-provoking discussion.

10. AOB

Noted: The Chair thanked all Board members for their valuable inputs and opened the floor for AOB.

Noted: No other business was raised

Noted: The Chair advised that the next Board meeting will take place on 14 December in Dublin.

11. Meeting of Advisory Board members – without Executive present

Noted: Advisory Board members welcomed the input from Tommie Gorman and the opportunity to look to the future strategically. They noted the wide range of high-quality work being produced by **safefood** staff and the importance of maintaining a healthy and safe environment for staff as we move forward.