



Minutes of the 169th meeting of the **safefood** Advisory Board

Held on Thursday, 18 April 2024 at 9:30am

CAFRE Loughry Campus, Cookstown.

Present: in person

Dr Eddie Rooney (ER) (Chair)

Ms Teresa Canavan (TC)

Mr Alex Attwood (AA)

Ms Irene Collins (IC)

Mr Damien McCallion (DMcC)

Mr Alan Lewis (AL)

Present: Virtually:

Prof Elizabeth Keane (EK)

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)

Dr Aileen McGloin, Director Nutrition (AMcG)

Ms Alison Dries (AD) Secretary

Mr Dermot Moriarty (DM) Communication Manager

Ms Aoife O'Reilly (AOR) Digital Manager

In attendance: virtually

Ms Trish Twohig, Director Food Safety (TTw)

Apologies:

Dr Kenneth McKenzie (KMck)

1. Introduction and apologies

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

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, 8 February 2024.

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: AL

Seconded: IC

4. Matters arising from the minutes

Noted: Relating to an action noted under item 5 of the previous minutes the Chair informed this would be covered in the Financial Report.

5. Financial Report

Noted: Board Members received the Financial Report for the first three months of 2024 (January to March) at the meeting. PF advised that the total budget for the year was just short of 8 million and the new finance system supports better forecasting. At this stage, **safefood** expects to meet its 2024 budget and has scheduled an interim review of the budget and allocation of resources before the end of May. PF advised that **safefood** is currently €325k behind budget YTD but €222k ahead of 2023 spend at the same period.

In relation to a KMcK query at the previous meeting regarding the variance in other support costs whereby the 2024 budget was a fifth of the actual 2023 and 2022 costs, PF explained this was due primarily to exceptional costs incurred in the

previous two years for activities such as the CEO recruitment competition, the vacant Corporate Operations Directorate posts (HR Executive, Corporate Operations Manager, Compliance Officer and IT executive) which incurred outsourcing costs rather than budgeted salaries, and additional costs arising due to changes to the official Language Act.

Noted: A discussion took place on decreased budget levels since 2010 despite rising staffing costs, enhanced media fee inflation and additional compliance requirements placed on the organisation such as Irish language, climate action and accessibility etc. The funding model of the 70/30 ratio split between Ireland and Northern Ireland and the implications of failing to receive additional funds were also discussed.

Noted: The Advisory Board to continue to monitor decreasing operational budgets and to highlight the effects of the substantial budget decreases since 2008/10 on **safefood**'s capacity to deliver effective activities and campaigns.

6. Annual Report of the Board's Audit and Risk Committee

Noted: The Annual Report of the Audit and Risk Committee was circulated prior to the meeting and taken as read. PF summarised the contents of the report.

Noted: Board members agreed the report was comprehensive and positive for the organisation.

Noted: The Chair thanked all involved and this was echoed by EK who noted two excellent audits and reports from the internal auditors as well as the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG). AA also complimented **safefood** on implementing its new risk management system which was more user friendly and interactive.

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

Noted: AA provided an update from the last Audit and Risk Committee meeting held on 20 February 2024.

- Thanks to all staff involved and external members Alan Myles and Mairéad Ní Chéadagain who also sit on ARC.
- A draft 2022 statutory Audit & Management Letter has been received from the C&AG which outlined that the external audit of **safefood** for the year ended 2022 resulted in no high-level issues, 2 medium level issues and 6 low level issues. 2022 was an especially challenging year for the Corporate Operations team due to staffing vacancies etc.
- As the CEO's appointment has been ratified by the NSMC, one medium risk issue had been downgraded by the time of the Board meeting. The C&AG reported the 6 low level issues to be inconsequential.
- The Internal Auditors (CrowleysDFK) presented their findings from the 2023 Internal audit. Findings were inconsequential with the internal auditor informing of a comforting audit report for the Audit Committee members, as internal controls are operating as they should be.

Noted: The Chair thanked AA, EK and staff for the positive reports and thanked Alan and Mairead on behalf of the Board.

Noted: The Chair congratulated GK on the ratification of his position as CEO.

8. Chief Executive Officers report

Noted: The Chief Executive Officer's report detailed **safefood's** activity since the last Board meeting on 8 February. The report was circulated to members prior to the meeting and taken as read. The CEO invited colleagues to brief on the following items.

- The Annual Report 2022 has been laid before the Oireachtas and Assembly and is now published on **safefood's** website. Focus is now on preparing the 2023 Report.
- The CEO and Director of Corporate Operations attended a meeting of the NSMC Joint Secretariat in Armagh on 26 March to discuss planning for a Health & Food Safety NSMC Sectoral Meeting, expected to take place in late

May/early June. The CEO provided an overview of the running order of the Sectoral Meetings for information to Board members.

- The NSMC appointed two new members from Ireland to the **safefood** Advisory Board. Two remaining NI vacancies will hopefully be filled later in 2024.
- FG gave an update on **safefood**'s new public health campaign which will focus on the food environment and is scheduled to launch in quarter 2.
- FG advised that there were more than 1,900 sign-ups to the **safefood** for business platform for the period 16 February to 30 March whilst the campaign was live. This is well above the set Key Performance Indicator (KPI) resulting in a successful campaign which is currently being fully evaluated.
- AMcG informed that the next All-island Obesity Action Forum will take place on 18 June in Dublin. The Forum has started to concentrate on a life course approach with the previous event focusing on children and the event in June focusing on pregnancy.
- 14,016 copies of the Healthy Lunchbox leaflet for primary school children have been distributed to date. FG reported that this is a popular resource with parents, who find it helpful, and the initiative is a nice partnership piece with the Health Service Executive. A similar leaflet for pre-school children is currently in production after research showed more than 120,000 pre-schoolers take their own food to their care centres - the aim is to provide healthy eating guidance early in life in order to establish positive eating behaviours.
- A new 3-year partnership contract is being negotiated with the IFA (2024-2026) in NI and will include new features such as a collaboration activity with Special Olympics Ireland, a national team endorsement (1 hour of 3 women's player appearances) to amplify the programme, and an emphasis on after-schools programme delivery. Discussions have also been held on the new food environment campaign, with the IFA open to exploring the possibility of changing their food offering in Windsor stadium and being a potential exemplar for the food environment campaign. The IFA are also going map the schools running the afterschool programme with a hope to link them up with **safefood**'s CFI's.

- TTW reported on **safefood**'s attendance at the IFEX 2024 Exhibition on 5-7 March in Belfast where '**safefood** for business' and other food safety strands of work were promoted.
- TTW thanked those Board members who attended the Northern Ireland Food and Drinks Awards with **safefood**. The event provided an opportunity to raise our profile and network in Northern Ireland.
- TTW gave an overview of recently completed research and a tender call for new projects. Details on how completed research is used was also given.
- AOR provided more detail on the recipe analysis project. All **safefood**'s recipes are correct from a nutrition and portion size aspect but we want to ensure they also taste nice and will work for home cooks when making them. If a visitor to **safefood**'s website has taken the trouble to search a recipe and is interested in cooking from scratch, we want to set them up for success so they will carry on cooking.

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

- IC asked if there is a monitoring system in place in regard to school meals. AMcG advised that **safefood** was involved with the design of the nutrition guidelines and the adherence to these guidelines is stipulated in catering contracts, however resources are not available for monitoring.
- DMcC acknowledged the work being undertaken with the National Ambulance Service which was needed and suggested that the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service may also be interested in such an initiative.
- AA commented that **safefood**'s partnership work comes across very strongly in the CEO report. He also advised that Minister Robin Swan is expected to stand down as Minister for Health in NI and it is assumed that Mr. Mike Nesbitt may be the new Minister. The CEO thanked AA for the update.

9. Presentation of **safefood's quarter one customer engagement report**

Noted: AOR presented **safefood**'s quarter one customer engagement report which is now in a new format, highly detailed and platform specific.

Noted: The Chair thanked AOR for the interesting presentation.

Noted: DMcC asked if there was any potential for AI to be utilised within **safefood** as a positive enhancement and not considered solely just as a risk. The CEO advised that an in-house team has been established to consider AI and its full potential for **safefood**, and to identify potential risks to our health promotion remit and activities.

10. Phase one of the new food environment campaign

Noted: DM presented on phase one for the new food environment campaign, scheduled to launch in May/June. Board Members were shown a working version of the T.V. ad which they were invited to comment on.

Noted: The Chair welcomed the consideration and work undertaken by **safefood** to take on this topic but highlighted his concerns at how challenging such a campaign might be. The Chair also wondered if the call to action needed to be more specific and directional, to avoid viewers asking how/who needs to make changes.

Noted: Board Members provided much feedback and suggested some practical changes.

11. CAFRE Presentation

Noted: Mr Fintan McCann of CAFRE presented an overview of the College of Agriculture Food and Rural Enterprise.

Noted: The Chair thanked Fintan for providing a greater understanding of the work of CAFRE.

12. Enhancing strategic value of **safefood's cross-border work**

Noted: The CEO referred to the discussion document which was circulated in advance of the meeting, and which asked Board Members to feedback on **safefood's** cross-border work. The CEO advised that he had established a working group to look at this. A preliminary discussion took place, and it was considered by Board Members that more time should be allocated to discussion of this topic given cross-border work is fundamental to the spirit and tone of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, under which **safefood** was established.

Noted: Board Members were invited to share their thoughts with the CEO by email and a more substantial session would be considered.

13. AOB

Noted: The CEO informed the June meeting will be held in Cork and it is planned that it will focus on the 2025 Business Plan.

14. Close

Noted: The meeting closed at 1.15 pm

15. Meeting of Advisory Board members – without Executive present

Noted: Members noted their appreciation for the work undertaken by staff and the quality of inputs to this meeting