



Minutes of the 179<sup>th</sup> meeting of the  
Safefood Advisory Board  
held on Thursday 4th December 2025 at 10:30 am  
Merchant Hotel, Belfast

**Members Present in person:**

Dr Eddie Rooney (ER) (Chair)  
Mr Alex Attwood (AA)  
Ms Irene Collins (IC)  
Ms Elaine Clohosey (EC)  
Mr Alan Lewis (AL)  
Dr Kenneth McKenzie (KMck)  
Ms Julie Andrews (JA)  
Mr Tim Morrow (TM)

**Members Present online (TEAMS)**

Dr Elaine Mooney (EM)

**In attendance:**

Dr Gary A. Kearney, Chief Executive Officer (GK)  
Ms Patricia Fitzgerald, Director of Corporate Operations (PF)  
Ms Fiona Gilligan, Director of Communications (FG)  
Dr Aileen McGloin, Director of Nutrition (AMG)  
Ms Trish Twohig, Director of Food Safety (TTW)  
Ms Colette O'Shea, (CO'S) Secretariat  
Ms Aoife O'Reilly, Communications Manager (AO'R)

**Apologies:**

Mr Damien McCallion (DMc)  
Ms Teresa Canavan (TC)  
Prof Elizabeth Keane (EK)

**1. Introduction and apologies**

**Noted:** The Chair welcomed members of the Advisory Board to the 179<sup>th</sup> Meeting.

## **2. Conflicts of interest**

**Noted:** No conflicts of interest were recorded.

## **3. Minutes of meeting held on Thursday 5 November 2025**

**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: AL

## **4. Matters arising from the minutes**

**Noted:** No matters arising.

## **5. Financial Report**

**Noted:** PF referred to the report which highlighted the expenditure to the end of November and PF advised that the forecast for the full year indicated that the organisation would come in on or slightly under budget. Additional funding from the Department of Health in Ireland in 2025 brought the overall budget to €8.6 million. PF highlighted that this has been a very tight financial year and significant work has gone into managing expenditure.

**Noted:** KMckK queried the likelihood of the additional funding becoming a recurring rather than an ad hoc feature. The CEO confirmed that the ad hoc funding has been received from the DoHI for a number of years now, reflecting their understanding that additional budget is required by Safefood on a sustained basis. However, due to fiscal constraints in Northern Ireland, additional co-funding is not yet available. The CEO advised that discussions are under way with the departments in both jurisdictions to resolve this.

**Noted:** TM queried staffing and pay structures. PF confirmed that the salary and pension costs currently represent just over 30% of the total budget. Concerns were raised by the Board about the sustainability of current funding levels given the increased salary, pension and operations obligations since 2016 and other inflationary pressures thereby reducing budget available for programmes and campaigns.

## 6. Report of the Audit & Risk Committee (ARC)

**Noted:** AA gave an update from the December Audit and Risk Committee, noting that the risk register remains the central focus of the Committee's work. The risk register was described as a substantial, detailed and dynamic system, regarded as the primary tool for identifying and managing organisational risks.

**Action:** The ARC is recommending that the risk register should be shared with the Board, in a future meeting to ensure greater visibility and engagement. PF agreed to add this to the January agenda.

**Noted:** AA highlighted as an example the recent risk-movement of cyber security risk within the register. Eighteen months ago, cyber-attack was ranked as the highest risk; whereas it is now ranked tenth, reflecting the organisation's successful management of the response to the ransomware attack and after-actions implemented. This was acknowledged as an example of effective risk mitigation and organisational resilience. AA also highlighted how Patricia has shared learnings from this experience with other public sector organisations, including the FSAI and Tourism Ireland.

**Noted:** AA further observed that seven or eight of the top ten risks relate to two core issues: financial uncertainty, particularly regarding Northern Ireland's budget contribution, and workforce profile, including succession planning challenges arising from an experienced but aging staff cohort. These issues were identified as critical for medium-term planning. In addition, while 4 posts were successfully regraded in earlier years, unfortunately job evaluations for the two critical in situ posts have not been progressed yet.

**Noted:** AA shared the importance of the risk register remaining a living document, embedded in the culture of both staff and the Board, and used proactively to inform decision-making. The register includes not only identified risks but also mitigation actions, some of which are assigned to specific individuals, ensuring accountability.

## 7. Chief Executive Report

**Noted:** The Chief Executive Officer's report detailed Safefood's operational activity since the last Board meeting on 5 November 2025. The report was circulated to Members prior to the meeting and taken as read.

**Noted:** The North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Health Sectoral Meeting which was originally scheduled for 27 November has been postponed. It is now expected

to take place in early 2026. Papers for the rescheduled meeting will include a CEO progress report and governance updates, notably the appointment of Safefood's new Chief Executive Officer. In addition, Dr. James McIntosh will deliver a presentation to Ministers on Safefood's work in Food Hypersensitivity.

**Noted:** PF reported that one of the actions arising from last year's cybersecurity recommendations was to undertake a further review of the organisation's cybersecurity framework. It had been intended to integrate this work with data governance and records management, as these were areas of exposure during the previous cyber incident. However, on the advice of the HSE Cyber Information Security Officer, these reviews will be separated due to differing expertise requirements. The cyber security review was complete, and the ICT & Facilities Manager had presented the findings to the Senior Management team as well as the Advisory Board and ARC. A separate tender process to undertake a review of Safefood's data and records management will commence shortly, with completion expected by the end of Quarter 1 next year. The Board will receive a further update at that stage.

**Noted:** The recruitment process to appoint a successor to the current CEO is nearing completion. Early indications from the sponsor Department in Dublin suggest that the successful candidate will take up the position in late January or early February.

**Noted:** The current lease for Safefood's Cork Office expires in late June next year. Agreement has been reached with the landlord to retain only the upstairs office space, reducing the footprint by half. Heads of agreement have been signed, and operational planning is underway to minimise dilapidation costs on the ground floor. Staff will relocate upstairs before Christmas. Legal arrangements for the new lease are in progress, and works will be undertaken to reconfigure the upstairs space within a limited budget. The revised arrangement will allow the organisation to remain in the current building for approximately ten years.

**Noted:** FG confirmed that the latest food safety campaign has been launched in Ireland, with the Northern Ireland element scheduled for release closer to Christmas. There has been significant media engagement, and the organisation has received increased requests for advice, particularly in relation to avian flu and poultry shortages. The campaign includes radio and television coverage and promotes messages on safe cooking and healthy eating. Website traffic has spiked, particularly around Thanksgiving, with international visitors accessing resources such as turkey cooking guides.

**Noted:** FG reported on the continuation of community engagement work, relating to the Food Environment campaign, initiated in October. This project involved consultations in twelve locations across the island to gather views on creating

healthier food environments. The findings will be presented in a report and at an event scheduled for early February next year. The event will feature an exhibition illustrating community visions for healthier environments, a panel discussion on next steps, and presentation of actions identified by the public.

**Noted:** AMcG provided an update on the All-Island Obesity Action Forum at which Safefood will launch its report on children's exposure to digital marketing, with a provisional date of 24 February 2026. The event will feature speakers addressing emerging advertising routes such as ordering platforms and gaming, which are increasingly used to target young people. The AIOAF continues to meet regularly as a closed group of key stakeholders, with the most recent meeting held in November following a rescheduled conference.

**Noted:** AMcG reported on the "Transform Your Trolley" programme, delivered in partnership with the Healthy Living Centre Alliance in Northern Ireland. The programme has achieved significant reach and highlighted impactful case studies, including work with young people leaving care who lack basic food skills and single parents facing barriers to healthy eating. The Healthy Living Centre Alliance operates 29 centres in areas of deprivation and remains a critical partner for addressing food poverty, which currently affects approximately 27% of households in Northern Ireland.

**Noted:** The Board highlighted the growing use of weight-loss drugs and queried the implications for nutritional advice. It was noted that individuals using these medications require significant dietary adjustments to meet nutritional needs within smaller food portions. Questions have been raised with the Department of Health in Ireland regarding responsibility for providing healthy eating guidance in this context. The Board agreed that this issue warrants further consideration as part of Safefood's strategic role in promoting nutrition.

**Noted:** TT provided an update on technical training and laboratory collaboration - training sessions for food testing laboratories were held in Belfast on 14–15 November, bringing together microbiology experts for the first time in over a year to exchange ideas and discuss methodologies. These forums are considered essential as they provide the only opportunity for such specialists to meet and share best practices. The agenda included interpretation of ISO 17025 standards, which govern laboratory testing compliance.

**Noted:** TT noted that similar sessions for chemistry laboratories are planned for next year. Currently, ten microbiology laboratories in Ireland and one in Northern Ireland collaborate to ensure food safety testing standards are maintained. This cooperation extends to sharing methodologies and, where appropriate, testing samples across jurisdictions to optimise resources and reduce costs. Chemistry laboratories also

participate in these exchanges, although the number of facilities has reduced over time.

**Noted:** TT highlighted the Safefood Skills Fund, which provides up to €1,700 for professional development activities relevant to food safety, such as attending conferences or visiting laboratories. The fund was increased from €1,200 earlier this year and has been promoted to laboratory staff to encourage uptake.

**Noted:** TT referenced two research reports nearing completion: one on consumer knowledge and behaviours related to food purchasing, storage, and cooking in domestic settings, and another on facilitating food allergen control in small food businesses.

## **8. Advisory Board Self Evaluation**

**Noted:** The Advisory Board self-evaluation paper was circulated in advance, and all members completed the questionnaire and provided additional comments, which were noted as very helpful. The evaluation process followed the same format as previous years, using DPER's questionnaire. Survey results showed very high satisfaction overall, with most responses scoring five, a few scoring four, and very few lower scores. Comments reinforced these findings, highlighting strong satisfaction with management, effective board functioning, and recognition of organisational challenges and achievements.

## **9. Overview of Safefood's Climate Action Roadmap and activities**

**Noted:** AMcG gave the Board an Overview of Safefood's Climate Action Roadmap and activities.

**Noted:** AMcG outlined the key pillars under which the organisation operates, noting significant progress in areas such as leadership and governance, staff engagement and training, procurement processes, and resource efficiency. The organisation continues to work towards achieving energy efficiency, meeting carbon targets, improving buildings, and implementing wider climate action plans aligned with UN Sustainability Goals. Reporting obligations, particularly to SEAI, have been a major focus over the past year, with ongoing monitoring and review processes in place.

**Noted:** The organisation has significantly reduced paper consumption through digitisation of newsletters, procurement processes, travel and subsistence claims, and records management. Conferences now use QR codes for agendas and feedback forms, eliminating printed materials. Staff are encouraged to adopt paperless meeting practices, and printer access has been reduced to one device per office. Safefood has a green procurement policy in place.

**Noted:** AMcG outlined sustainability measures for events, which have become a core pillar of the organisation's approach. A dedicated subgroup developed a checklist to ensure venues meet sustainability standards, including policies on refillable jugs, reusable crockery, and minimising food waste through closer ordering to event dates. These measures have significantly reduced single-use plastics and improved overall sustainability at events.

## **10 Safefood Design Thinking & Innovation**

**Noted:** AO'R provided an overview of the organisation's innovation journey during the year. At the beginning of the year, the Executive Board decided to explore ways to develop a culture of innovation within Safefood. An innovation team was established, which subsequently tendered for a facilitator and appointed Fergal Brophy of UCD. The organisation adopted a design thinking approach, chosen for its strong user-focused methodology and structured process that can be repeated and embedded within the organisation. Fergal's experience of working with both public sector bodies and private companies was highlighted as a key factor in his selection.

**Noted:** 4 organisational challenges were selected and AO'R noted that the overarching theme of these challenges was to make organisational processes smoother and more efficient, cutting out unnecessary steps and paperwork. The approach encouraged collaboration across departments and fostered creative problem-solving within defined parameters.

**Noted:** Teams were given ten weeks to develop solutions within defined constraints, including a fund for implementation. A pitch session is scheduled to take place later in the afternoon of Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> December at the MAC and will present the outcomes of the innovation programme, with four cross-functional teams showcasing their solutions in a structured "Pitch Perfect" format. Each team will make a clear request, such as time or funding, and sponsors will indicate their support. The session will include audience questions, followed by the Advisory Board selecting two awards: Best Pitch and Most Impactful Idea. A People's Choice award will also be determined by audience vote.

**Noted:** AO'R stressed that the primary goal of this initiative is to foster a culture of innovation, collaboration, and continuous improvement across the organisation, rather than focusing solely on the final outputs. She commended the enthusiasm and commitment of all participants and emphasised the importance of sustaining this process annually to enhance organisational performance and staff engagement.

## **11. Tour de Table**

The Chair invited comments from attendees. No issues were raised.

The Chair noted a farewell to 2 departing members, Alex Attwood and Teresa Canavan, expressing appreciation for their significant contributions and their huge support to the organisation and members acknowledged the value of their advice and involvement.

The meeting closed with thanks from the Chairperson.

## **12. Meeting of Advisory Board members – without Executive present**

**Noted:** Advisory Board met without the Executive present and members discussed emerging challenges for 2026.

## **13: The MAC Centre: Staff Innovation Pitches – Afternoon of 5<sup>th</sup> December**

Signed

---

Dr. Eddie Rooney  
Chairperson  
Safefood Advisory Board.