

Meeting of the Safefood Advisory Committee

Bullitt Hotel, Belfast

Thursday 9th / Friday 10th of October 2025

MINUTES

SAC members present: Dr Martin Rose (Chair)

Prof Mary Brennan

Dr Nazih Eldin

Kathryn Walsh

Dr Anne Mullen

Dr Sinéad Furey

Nuala Collins

Eimear O'Rourke

Aoife Moran

SAC apologies: Dr Muiris O 'Céidigh

Dr Fiona Lalor

safefood staff: Dr James McIntosh

Colette O'Shea

Dermot Moriarty

Dr Aileen McGloin

Trish Twohig

Patricia Fitzgerald

safefood apologies: Dr Gary Kearney

Fiona Gilligan

1. Welcome, introductions & apologies

The Chair welcomed the members to the first meeting of the new safefood Advisory Committee (SAC). He emphasized the importance of open and transparent dialogue and encouraged the members to offer constructive feedback and identify gaps to improve support.

Apologies were noted from Dr Muiris O 'Céidigh, Dr Fiona Lalor, Dr Gary Kearney and Fiona Gilligan. No comments on the agenda items were received in advance of the meeting.

As this was the inaugural meeting of the new SAC, each member gave a brief introduction to their background expertise and experience.

Noted: The Chair acknowledge the work of the previous chair, Prof. Elizabeth Keane and the previous SAC members.

Noted: The Chair acknowledged the online pre-meetings that were convened between the secretariat to the SAC and the new SAC members.

Noted: There were no conflicts of interest expressed by members with regard to the agenda items.

2. Minutes of the SAC meeting of Friday, 29th of September 2023 and matters arising (Doc: SAC 10OCT2025 Doc 2)

Noted: The members accepted the minutes. They were proposed by Dr Nazih Eldin and seconded by Prof Mary Brennan who were both members of the previous SAC.

Noted: There were no matters arising.

3. Structure of Safefood

As this was the inaugural meeting of the new SAC, the directors from the four Safefood directorates gave brief presentations on their work.

Role of the Food Safety Directorate: Trish Twohig, Director

Noted: The Safefood Knowledge Network has attracted over four thousand members since 2011.

Noted: A number of events were organised throughout the island of Ireland under the auspices of the Network, as well as a bimonthly ezine and a bursary programme for members to avail of for upskilling.

Noted: The online eLearning resource, Safefood-for-Business, has been a resounding success with over fifteen thousand personnel from food businesses taking the course.

Noted: Responsibility for the management of Safefood's research lies within the directorate and to date over 150 research projects have been funded, most involving a North-South collaboration.

Role of the Nutrition Directorate: Dr Aileen McGloin, Director

Noted: The strategic priorities for the Directorate are (a) overweight and obesity prevention, and (b) food poverty (inequalities in access to a healthy diet).

Noted: The key areas of work for the Directorate are (a) policy development and implementation, (b) networks and stakeholder engagement, (c) community food initiatives, (d) research and (e) communications.

Noted: The Directorate is involved in five key areas of policy namely (a) Development of Fitter Futures, (b) Development of new Obesity Policy and Action Plan, (c) Online Health Task Force, (d) National Intersectoral working group, and (e) Folic Acid Steering Group & subgroups.

Noted: The Directorate promotes collaboration and shared learning across the island of Ireland via (a) the All-island Food Poverty network, (b) the All-island Obesity Action Forum, and (c) the All island Food Environment Forum.

Noted: The Community Food Initiatives has doubled in size since its inception and now involves 28 organisations across the island of Ireland as part of its core programme for 2025. These include 4 cross-border partnership that involve 8 organisations.

Role of the Communications Directorate: Dermot Moriarty (deputising for Fiona Gilligan, Director)

Noted: The Communications Directorate focuses on supporting people to eat safer and healthier food through earning their trust and understanding their situation and challenges.

Noted: We follow best practice in diversity and inclusion, literacy and accessibility, the Irish language, personal privacy and GDPR.

Noted: A brief description of the current media campaigns was given. We undertake both qualitative and quantitative public research to provide the evidence base, and support, these campaigns.

Noted: Partnership working is essential to what we do. Currently this includes working with the Irish Football Association (After-school programme), Special Olympics Ireland (Health programme, and the GAA (Fuel your game).

Role of the Corporate Operations Directorate: Patricia Fitzgerald, Director

Noted: We are responsible for satisfying Safefood's Legal, Finance, HR, IT, Facilities and Corporate Governance requirements.

Noted: The Directorate oversees our 'Value-for-Money' objective and the 2025 Budget.

Noted: The elements of the annual Corporate Operations business plan are audit, governance, accountability, planning and compliance.

Noted: The Directorate looks after facilities and ICT, HR, oversees Risk Management, the Advisory Board and Committee, and the Audit and Risk Committee.

4. Proposed Listeria food safety campaign (Doc: SAC 10OCT2025 Doc 3)

Presented by Trish Twohig, Director Food Safety. Four questions were posed to the members in the advance document, and these were taken individually during the discussion.

Q1. Target group: Which group should we select for this communication? Older people? Pregnant women? Immunocompromised individuals?

Noted: Safefood currently has research in the field looking at factors influencing vulnerability to listeriosis in older people. We should not limit our focus to the outputs from this research but also take account of experiences worldwide.

Noted: There had been a recent outbreak of listeriosis in Ireland during the summer of 2025 in which one person died. This had been linked to ready meals. Safefood was engaged with the FSAI (and FSA in NI) on market research which targets the over-65s with age segmentation. The vulnerable groups identified are older adults, pregnant women and the immunocompromised. The Safefood campaign will focus on older adults.

Noted: Getting older people to change the habits of a lifetime can be challenging, especially as they are constantly reminded of their vulnerability in general.

ACTION: Safefood to obtain statistics on the impact of Listeria on the populations on the island of Ireland including hospitalizations and mortality.

Q2. Message prioritisation: Which message frame do you think we should prioritise and why? Do you think it would be more effective to emphasise personal vulnerability or to highlight the controls?

Noted: A discussion ensued on whether to focus messaging on ready meals or Listeria more broadly. Also, should the emphasis be on personal vulnerability or on food safety controls.

Noted: A campaign needs to be multifaceted combining factual information and empathetic storytelling with personas. It should be targeted widely to avoid stigmatizing vulnerable groups but rather focus on empowering people through clear, actionable guidance.

Q3. Channel & messenger selection: What channels and messengers do you think will most effectively reach the vulnerable (or their caregivers) about listeria risk?

Noted: Multiple communications channels should be utilised to reach diverse audiences. These should include community networks, NGOs, and informal caregivers (including family, friends, neighbours and other peer influencers).

Noted: Life changes and changes in personal circumstance can result in the risk of illness increasing.

Noted: It may be necessary to associate advice with similar 'known' good behaviours and equate one with the other.

Q4. Working with food producers: Should food labelling, particularly on RTE foods, be influenced to take account of risk, particularly for high-risk groups?

Noted: Labelling was discussed as a tool for instigating behavioural change, with a cautionary note around the importance of clarity and consistency in labelling advice across different markets. It was suggested to use focus groups to test any messaging and labelling prototypes.

Noted: The effectiveness of any labelling will be influenced by the target person's perception of the risk to them.

Noted: Unless any proposed labelling changes are mandated in legislation, it is highly likely they will not be widely adopted. That said, the dairy industry adopted a statement on galactosemia, and there are precautionary statements on frozen fruit berries, so the food industry may well be open to new advisory/precautionary statements.

5. All-Island Obesity Action Forum events brief (Doc: SAC 10OCT2025 Doc 4)

Presented by Dr Aileen McGloin, Director Nutrition. Four questions were posed to the members in the advance document, and these were taken together during the discussion.

If our goal is to create a community of professionals working to address obesity across the island, bringing them together to learn, network and collaborate, then:

- 1. Is this network the right activity to meet our objectives (is this the right frame)?*
- 2. How would we scale this network? Specifically, if this is the right frame, how do we balance in-person and hybrid and place a value on each?*
- 3. How would we innovate to improve reach, engagement and attendance?*
- 4. How do we utilise our newsletter better?*

Noted: The network's strength is the diversity of interests of its members. Also important to maximise the diversity of the membership.

Noted: More regular updates/presentations would be extremely beneficial, especially from the members who could share information and evidence in real time – lunchtime webinars, podcast, hybrid events, etc. Or even more high-input events such as biannual meetings or an all-island food forum with multiple themes, etc. E.g., UK FSA ‘Food for thought’ lunchtime seminars, the FAO regular updates on AMR, or the Scottish Policy Research Exchange model are worth exploring.

Noted: Consideration should be given to making the provision of material (slides, handouts, etc.) for dissemination as a condition of presenting at Safefood events.

Noted: Safefood staff are currently being trained in Design Thinking for the purposes of innovative thinking and planning, and this could be applied to our events in the near future. Other futures technologies such as back-casting are worth investigating for this purpose.

6. Proposed Raw Milk food safety campaign (Doc: SAC 10OCT2025 Doc 5)

Presented by Dermot Moriarty, Manager - Communications Directorate. Two questions were posed to the members in the advance document, and these were taken together during the discussion.

Q1. Risk – benefit framing: How should Safefood best frame the balance of ‘perceived benefits vs. proven risks’ in public communications to ensure clarity without alienating consumers who are motivated by wellness narratives?

Q2. Industry and regulatory alignment: How can Safefood work with producers, retailers, and regulators to ensure that risk messages on raw milk are consistent, visible and credible, while minimising reputational backlash from farm or artisan producer groups who promote raw milk, or those who have been drinking raw milk for most of their lives, as part of their business model?

Noted: So raw milk is a product which is available for sale. Farming families would be a regular consumer's of it. The cohort typically under 45 and from an ABC1 background consume raw milk for the perceived health benefits.

Noted: Safefood needs to be quite sure that this is a public health issue before pursuing a campaign. What are the statistics and trends? We need to consider the wider range of dairy products and not just milk. Also, the potential for an artisan backlash. We would also need to ensure there is regulatory alignment at an EU level.

Noted: We need to consider the requirement to explain the process of pasteurization in terms of framing any risk-benefit. Similarly, clarify the relationship between homogenisation and potential allergenicity.

Noted: Current social media amplifying the ‘danger’ of ultra processed foods, the promotion of artisan food production can lead to assumptions about the wholesomeness of raw milk.

Noted: Anecdotal reports indicate that a lot of people rely on raw milk to at least alleviate symptoms of food hypersensitivity. Research has shown a potential association with raw milk consumption and lower rates of asthma in children on farms. However, causation has not been established as there were too many variables. Also, reductions in whey isolate protein may influence the allergenicity of the milk.

Noted: Consider promotion of safer dairy alternatives such as kefir.

Action: Safefood to liaise with the National Dairy Council and equivalents to ensure there is no duplication of effort and also as a potential source of information and research.

Action: Eimear O’Rourke to send on links to the quoted scientific studies to the members.

7. Proposed Raw Milk food safety campaign (Doc: SAC 10OCT2025 Doc 5)

The Chair invited ideas for topics of interest and potential research from the members. The following topics were proffered:

- Consider producing fact sheets (or something similar) to break myths and explain some labelling that can be misunderstood. Topics could include such issues as the pros and cons of UPF, raw milk, vegan, vegetarian, natural vs synthetic food additives. Check out the IFST, EUFIC.
- Consider producing fact sheets and short form video series on social media (TikTok, Instagram) to get the information out.
- Gaps of information re FH and the consequences for same.
- There is a renewed focus on plant diets (includes meat and dairy) and a lot of misconceptions so fact sheets/ information by Safefood would help.
- A review of the lived experience by consumers of the new School Meals Programmes.
- Consider looking at 'fusion diets' (Irish and immigrant) and their health benefits. How does Safefood communicate re new diets.
- The rise of dark kitchens and dark retail. What is the extent of these on the lol. Changing nature of food provisioning because of apps – outsourcing everything especially by the young (ramifications for food safety and obesity).
- The impact of high protein trends on dietary patterns
- People around food policy. Safefood is part of this on the island of Ireland so can we understand the lived experiences of those involved in policy? Can politics interfere with scientific-supported change? (The Climate and Health team in Scotland would be worth contacting in this regard).
- Ireland will have the EU presidency in the second half of 2026. This may be an opportunity to look at how food safety has evolved. (Worth checking out the DFA fund around the presidency).
- A lot of interest in fibre (preventing colon cancer, etc.). Possible opportunity to look at this under the auspices of the EU presidency.
- What are the ramifications of sustainability and food redistribution from a food safety perspective?
- How do we combat misinformation? Consider a workshop or paper or info on how to recognise this and combat it.
- Alcohol is overlooked despite contributing many calories to the national diet. Consider starting a discussion on this.
- We have excellent policies in relation to healthy eating, but we need more standards for different groups, especially for a wider population as it captures more.
- Consider involving more unheard groups to feed into information, actions and policy.
- The general population is now detached from food skills. Consider demystifying issues around proper cooking skills and not just for those in lower socioeconomic groups. There is now a real danger that the next generation will not only be culinary illiterates but won't even know how to buy food.
- The direct and indirect costs of obesity need to be ascertained anew as the 2012 data is outdated now.
- Consider a research call on knowledge, attitudes and behaviours (and consumption) of parents/grandparents on complementary (weaning) foods for children. There's a massive gap in knowledge in terms of the nutritional composition of these foods.
- Can we leverage those apps that track bought food through the home fridge and their best before dates, etc.

- Other topics to consider include food waste, AMR, microplastics, and PFAS.

8. AOB & Date of next meeting

Noted: The Chair thanked the members for their diverse contributions and collaborative spirit and encouraged them to share further ideas with the SAC secretariat post-meeting. The Chair closed the meeting.

Noted: The next meeting is tentatively set for Friday, 17th of April 2026. Venue TBC in Ireland.