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## RESEARCH TENDER CALL



## TENDER INFORMATION DOCUMENT

**Project Reference No.: 04-2026**

**Project Title:**

Assessing the health aspects of meal delivery applications on the island of Ireland

**1. Objective/Knowledge Gap:**

The main objectives of this research project are to:

- Map the geographical area covered by meal delivery applications across the island of Ireland to assess availability and accessibility.
- Assess the nutritional quality of food provided by delivery apps across the island of Ireland
- Assess behaviour in relation to meal delivery applications (who uses them, frequency, what drives choice).
- Assess how design factors, and display, marketing and promotional factors impact food choices on meal delivery applications.
- Propose a set of recommendations for methods to incentivise healthier meals on meal delivery applications available on the island of Ireland.
- Identify policies and regulations that are adequate and that could be adapted and applied to address the specific features of meal delivery applications across the island of Ireland.

**2. Background**

The availability of smartphone meal delivery applications has rapidly increased and are now a growing part of the digital and “out of the home” food environment. On the island of Ireland, population survey data indicate substantial engagement with digitally enabled out of home food purchasing. In Ireland, 46% of internet users ordered ready-made food online in 2024 (CSO, 2024) while in Northern Ireland, 22% reported ordering takeaway via an online delivery company in the last 4 weeks (Food Standards Agency (2024)).

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According to the World Health Organization (WHO) the implications of this sector on health, nutrition, environment and society at large are not yet well understood (WHO 2021). Past research has shown that meals purchased outside of the home can be less healthy than foods prepared at home and may lead to unhealthy dietary patterns, a risk factor for noncommunicable diseases (WHO 2022). Emerging evidence highlights the role of meal delivery applications in extending the reach of the physical food environment, mediated through digital technologies such as online ordering platforms, food delivery apps and digital marketing (Gramheim et al 2022; Halloran et al 2021; Mahawar et al 2022). Meal delivery applications are understudied and, in almost all cases, current policy and legal frameworks do not apply to this component of digital food environments.

Jia et al (2025) have proposed a research framework for minimising nutrition-related harms from meal delivery applications that includes three key pillars:

- Measure: Trends in use; Consumption and context; Consumer behaviours.
- Monitor: Expanding food environments; Marketing and promotion tactics used.
- Mitigate: Policy options; Interventions.

This tender sets out to measure trends in use, consumption and context and consumer behaviour which will in turn guide both potential monitoring and policy options.

### 3. Approach

The study will adopt a mixed-methods design. It should

- integrate geospatial mapping of meal delivery applications coverage and access, across the island of Ireland
- assess the nutritional quality of foods offered,
- include quantitative and qualitative research on public use including drivers of choice considering equity and policy,
- identify policies and regulations that may be used
- propose recommendations.

Building on recent WHO work on digital and out-of-home (OOH) food environments, the project will generate how meal delivery applications extend and reshape food access, choice and marketing, and will translate findings into actionable recommendations for policy options. This work is being commissioned in the context of the relevant obesity policies in both jurisdictions.

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#### 4. Technical Specification

##### (a) Scope of research

- This research will cover all major meal delivery applications active on the island. All outlet types covered by the meal delivery applications (MDA) are within scope e.g. fast food, full-service restaurant, convenience store, supermarket, café etc.
- The geographic scope will include urban, suburban, small-town and rural areas in both jurisdictions, capturing cross-border considerations where apps operate in both jurisdictions.
- The research should include geographic information system (GIS) mapping of delivery zones, distance bands and delivery times to characterise “reach” and potential exposure e.g. maximum radius, number and type of outlets accessible from sampled residential locations. This should be mapped against metrics such as area-level deprivation, rural/urban nature and jurisdiction.
- The project will focus on prepared meals and snacks and beverage offerings.
- The research should include the range of menus, popular items, position size, promotions and meal deals offered on MDAs.
- The research should include assessment of digital marketing techniques such as personalisation, nudging, discounts, value bundles and should capture data on marketing and promotion features e.g. banners, personalised recommendations, time-limited deals, meal bundles, targeted offers using existing WHO/INFORMAS digital marketing typologies and assessed for the proportion of healthier versus less healthy items highlighted. The research should provide data on the MDA user interface (UI) and user experience (UX) features relevant to dietary health and capture menu architecture, default settings, search and filter functions, nutritional or environmental information, salience of price and convenience cues.
- The research should assess the nutritional profile of the foods offered using available validated or adapted items/approaches. For example, the WHO nutritional profiling of the products offered to support comparability with international data.
- This research should also adapt INFORMAS Food Retail, Promotion, and Composition modules for digital food environments, generating comparable indicators on MDA availability (delivery zones/outlets), promotions (% unhealthy items discounted), (Swinburn et al 2013) and nutritional quality (% menu items meeting WHO nutrient profiles)
- The research should interrogate population use of MDAs across the island, assessing:

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- frequency and recency of MDA use
  - typical order composition
  - spending
  - ordering context (home/work/other)
  - motivations and perceived barriers/enablers to healthier and more sustainable choices including decision-making on what to order; perceived healthiness and value; experiences of nudges such as default options, upselling, time-limited offers, loyalty schemes and visibility of healthier items
  - attitudes to potential regulatory or platform changes e.g. defaults, labelling, restrictions on promotions
  - The data should include socio-demographic variables and self-reported health indicators to examine associations with MDA use. The research should consider sub-analyses by age, gender, socio-economic position, and other relevant characteristics to assess health equity implications of meal delivery applications use.
  - The policy aspect of the project should:
    - review emerging policy options internationally and assess potential routes for integration into policies for non-communicable disease (NCD) prevention in both jurisdictions
    - consider platform accountability that can inform policy approaches on the island of Ireland.
  - The research should extend to the gathering and collating stakeholder views on current policy coverage, perceived regulatory gaps, opportunities for integrating MDAs into existing public health strategies, and feasibility of policy options recommended by WHO for digital food environments. Stakeholders include policy-makers, regulators, local government planners, public health professionals, citizens, industry representatives and civil society.
  - The research should be collaborative across a number of relevant disciplines including public health, geographical information systems and nutrition and other relevant fields.
  - It should be noted that Safefood is not an active participant in the project and sole responsibility lies with the successful tenderer.
- (b) Literature review
- A brief literature review, providing the rationale and full description of the methodology and approach should be provided.

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(c) Qualitative and quantitative work

- A full justification and rationale for the proposed methodology and analytical approaches will be required.
- It will be necessary to indicate for all aspects of the project how the proposed data will be accessed, managed, analysed and reported.

(d) Analysis

- Quantitative and qualitative analyses should be integrated to support interpretation consistent with the WHO’s food systems and digital environment frameworks to refine recommendations and identify leverage points.
- Analyses should be used to examine:
  - relationships between area-level deprivation, MDA outlet availability, nutritional quality of offerings, and patterns of MDA use.
  - how MDAs alter food access beyond traditional neighbourhood boundaries, characterising the emergence of “hybrid” food environments and potential differential impacts on vulnerable populations.
  - potential health gains from specific platform or policy changes e.g. improving the nutritional profile of promoted items, introducing default healthy options.

(e) Data handling and Reporting

The Applicant shall submit to Safefood an interim written progress report at six-month intervals, detailing progress against each project deliverable. Upon completion of the study, the Applicant shall submit a comprehensive final report collating all outcomes, findings and agreed outputs.

The Applicant shall maintain complete, accurate and secure records of all data, documentation, forms and electronic files generated in the course of the project and shall retain such records until otherwise directed in writing by Safefood. Safefood reserves the right to request access to or copies of such records where required.

(f) Quality assurance

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- The Applicant shall apply appropriate and validated methodologies for all quantitative components of the work, where applicable, and shall clearly specify and justify the qualitative analytical methods to be used.
- The Applicant must demonstrate that all methods proposed are robust, fit for purpose and capable of producing reliable and credible findings. Safefood reserves the right to seek clarification or require revisions where the proposed approach does not meet acceptable quality standards.
- Ethical approval will be an essential component where data collection from participants is involved.

#### **5. Proposed Activities/Deliverables**

- A technical report published to the Safefood website which considers all those items set out in the scope
- Dissemination of report and findings to relevant audiences including for example presentation at:
  - A meeting of the All-Island Obesity Action forum
  - healthier food environment forum
  - A stakeholder webinar.
- Policy briefings for Ireland and Northern Ireland

#### **6. Evaluation of Tenders**

Quality of the proposal:

- ✓ Anticipated deliverables.
- ✓ Research method and facilities.
- ✓ Value for money.
- ✓ Potential for application.
- ✓ Work plan, including the overall timeframe.
- ✓ Environmental and social considerations.

Quality of Applicants:

- ✓ Experience in subject area.
- ✓ Quality Assurance and Quality Control measures in place.

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## 7. Duration of Project

18 months

## 8. Tender Application Forms and Guidelines

The Tender Application Form and associated Guidelines can be downloaded from this link

<https://www.safefood.net/professional/research/research-tenders>

They can also be obtained by emailing [research@safefood.net](mailto:research@safefood.net), quoting the project reference number 04-2026. Alternatively, please contact Safefood as per the details below.

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The closing date for receipt of applications by Safefood is no later than **4pm Friday 15 May 2026**.

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