



Minutes of the 180<sup>th</sup> meeting of the  
Safefood Advisory Board  
held on Thursday 12 February 2026 at 10:30 am  
FSAI Offices, Dublin

**Members Present in person:**

Dr Eddie Rooney (ER) (Chair)  
Dr Kenneth McKenzie (KMK)  
Ms Julie Andrews (JA)  
Mr Tim Morrow (TM)

**Members Present online (TEAMS)**

Dr Elaine Mooney (EM)  
Prof Elizabeth Keane (EK)

**In attendance:**

Dr Joanne Uí Chruialaich, Chief Executive Officer (JUC)  
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 (AOR) (attend for her presentation only)

**Apologies:**

Mr Damien McCallion (DMC)  
Ms Irene Collins (IC)  
Mr Alan Lewis (AL)  
Ms Elaine Clohosey (EC)

**1. Introduction and apologies**

**Noted:** The Chair welcomed members of the Advisory Board to the 180<sup>th</sup> Meeting and introduced Dr Joanne Uí Chruialaich, Safefood's newly appointed Chief Executive Officer. The Advisory Board Members provided brief introductions.

**2. Conflicts of interest**

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

### **3. Minutes of meeting held on Thursday 4th December 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: JA

Seconded: KMK

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

**Noted:** No matters arising.

### **5. Financial Report**

**Noted:** PF presented the financial report for the full year 2025. Total expenditure was €8.58m against a budget of €8.66m, resulting in slight underspend. 2025 expenditure increased compared with €7.70m in 2024.

**Noted:** PF explained that close management of budgets has ensured that Safefood operated within approved budgets.

**Noted:** In response to questions, PF confirmed that travel, recruitment and training costs will remain high due to the absence of Northern-based employees and increasing cross border travel demands. The Chair commended PF and her team for effective financial management.

### **6. 2022 Financial Memo – Annual tabling for information**

**Noted:** PF drew the Board's attention to the 2022 Financial Memorandum and clarified that there were no changes during the past year. Two outstanding actions to ensure full compliance were resolved in 2025: (1) the internal audit contract was retendered, and this includes the added requirement; and (2) for the first time, both the Business Plan and Corporate Plan were approved in advance by the North–South Ministerial Council which facilitated their publication.

### **7. Risk Register – Annual Presentation**

**Noted:** PF provided details on Safefood's Risk Governance framework and demonstrated the risk register reporting. Following demonstration of the risk-management platform, the Board noted the complexity of organisational risks, including concerns about budgetary constraints, maturing staffing profile and anticipated loss of skills, external relationships, and the wider political context.

**Noted:** EK proposed that the full risk register be presented to the Board annually. Members agreed.

**Action:** An annual risk register presentation will be provided at the first Advisory Board meeting each year.

**Noted:** Following the retirement of Alex Attwood at the end of 2025, a vacancy exists on the Audit & Risk Committee (ARC). The Chair invited expressions of interest to sit on the ARC and PF noted that, while a Northern Ireland member would be preferable for jurisdictional balance, it is not essential. Training is available. KMK and JA expressed an interest in sitting on the ARC.

**Noted:** EK added that, as a current member of the Audit and Risk Committee, she wished to reassure any prospective volunteers that the committee is very well supported by PF and chaired effectively by Alan Myles of Tourism Ireland. She encouraged members to consider putting themselves forward.

## **8. Chief Executive Report**

**Noted:** The Chief Executive Officer's report detailed Safefood's operational activity since the last Board meeting on Thursday 4 December 2025. The report was circulated to Members prior to the meeting and taken as read.

**Noted:** Two long serving staff members are departing Safefood at the end of February, transition planning and recruitment is underway. Marking her retirement after 25 years, FG expressed sincere gratitude to the Board and Management and said she is confident in Safefood's strong future and ongoing success.

**Noted:** Updates were provided on the citizens' engagement programme. The Board noted strong public participation, the effectiveness of visual materials and the need to navigate policy adjacent themes arising from the engagement. Food marketing and local food environments were noted as top citizen identified priorities.

**Noted:** The Chair remarked that the scale of upcoming work, particularly in citizen engagement and adapting communications to an AI driven environment, may create competing pressures on staff capacity. He encouraged the team to be realistic about workload and mindful of bandwidth. JA offered assistance in securing access to both local library networks and Libraries NI venues for future engagement activities, which the team welcomed. It was also noted that a digital version of the recent exhibition, including videos and polls, would be circulated for members who could not attend the event.

**Action:** Staff to liaise with JA offering access to Libraries NI and related networks and circulate digital versions of exhibition.

**Noted:** The Board noted challenges in national discourse surrounding school meals and misinformation, particularly regarding food poverty. Misinformation is a growing strategic issue, intensified by AI driven platforms such as HealthGPT.

**Action:** Issue to be referred to Executive Board for organisation wide consideration.

**Noted:** Members discussed youth health behaviours and noted increasing health consciousness and scepticism of influencers among older teenagers and young adults, while acknowledging behavioural extremes.

**Noted:** Safefood's landlord unexpectedly advised that the Dublin lease will terminate at the end of 2026. Safefood must identify a new premises, alternative options have been assessed; shortlisted sites are under consideration.

**Noted:** There is no capital funding available for 2026 (budgets already set). Safefood's aim is to secure a solution requiring minimal immediate refurbishment.

**Noted:** The Cork office lease ends in June. Safefood will retain only the first-floor accommodation under a new agreement. Dilapidation obligations and reconfiguration work are underway. Legal and operational planning is progressing.

**Noted:** The Department provided €420,000, 70% of the requested amount. Safefood will need to stage works, prioritise essentials, and potentially revise specifications. All Cork staff relocated upstairs. Business continuity planning is essential to avoid disruption during construction.

## **9. Overview of Safefood 2026 Business Plan – Communications**

**Noted:** AOR outlined the Communications Team structure, recent staff changes, temporary cover and the team's broad remit across campaigns, digital, social media, partnerships, media relations and design. The Board acknowledged the small team size relative to annual output. AOR also highlighted the need to prepare for AI-driven, no-click search environments and to conduct a full content audit, noting that communications will remain grounded in lived experience.

**Noted:** Updates were provided on programme delivery. Safefood will support the 2026 Special Olympics National Games in Dublin (c.1,000 athletes, significant volunteer involvement) and continue "Healthy at Play." The GAA "Fuel Your Game" programme will expand from its 2025 pilot to all clubs nationwide in 2026, with a downloadable digital book for parents, coaches and clubs. Football partnerships through "On the Ball" continue, with expansion planned to after-school clubs, community programmes and seasonal camps. The 2026 *Clean As You Go* campaign will feature updated creative direction and benchmarking, and Balmoral Show materials will integrate food-safety messaging. Learnings from the 2025 Balmoral Show will also strengthen the 2026 approach, particularly the integration of handwashing and kitchen-hygiene messages in live cooking demonstrations.

**Noted:** The Food Environment Campaign Phase 2 exhibitions (January 2026, Belfast and Dublin) were highly attended by policymakers, public health, NGOs and community groups. The visual Citizen Engagement Approach was especially impactful, with citizens prioritising limits on food marketing, healthier local environments and retail-space redesign, with consistent feedback across NI and ROI. Safefood has produced 70 nutritionally and

sensory-analysed recipes since 2024, with 30 more planned for 2026 toward a goal of 101 beginner-friendly recipes with visual assets. The Rufus Handwashing Programme continues to see strong demand in preschools and early-years settings. Over 2,400 students completed the 2025 *Safefood for Life* exam, and the programme remains a key educational asset. Preschool Healthy Lunch Box materials will be distributed again in 2026. The Board noted bandwidth concerns; FG and AOR confirmed prioritisation measures are underway.

### **Overview of Safefood 2026 Business Plan – Food Safety**

**Noted:** TTW provided an update on Safefood’s 2026 Food Safety work programme, covering major microbiology, hygiene, consumer-behaviour and training initiatives across the island. Research underway following the 2025 listeriosis outbreak shows confusion among older adults about whether meals are fully cooked and the meaning of “piping hot.” Parallel research was commissioned in Northern Ireland, as the implicated meals were sold cross-border, with joint discussions planned with FSAI and FSA NI once final reports are received. *Campylobacter* cases have risen by 27% (2021–2024), and joint research with HPSC and FSAI is ongoing.

**Noted:** Meat thermometer ownership has increased significantly, though new issues are emerging, including uncertainties around small turkey cook times and use of thermometers to prevent overcooking. Studies on lightly cooked eggs, rawmilk behaviours and related misinformation are in progress. Farming insights highlighted that TB remains a serious and persistent risk, with Northern Ireland reporting almost double the incidence compared to ROI, reinforcing the need for strong evidencebased counter-messaging.

**Noted:** Food-hypersensitivity work now prioritises environmental literacy and community education rather than helplines, with tailored guidance and a cross-border coeliac resource in development. The Board emphasised addressing misinformation around allergy testing. Gluten-free workshops continue to grow, and SME and community food-safety training remain in demand; two webinars in 2026 will focus on OBE and listeria legislation. Reports due in 2026 include Ten Years On and Cost of Living and Food Storage, and ongoing research covers air fryers, novel cooking technologies and the Understanding Food Safety Behaviours Among Vulnerable Consumer (YOPI) on the island of Ireland.

### **Overview of Safefood 2026 Business Plan – Nutrition**

**Noted:** AMG provided a detailed update on the Nutrition workload for 2026. Safefood continues to lead the All-Island Food Poverty Network, with the 2026 event scheduled for June, and the pilot mentoring programme showing strong early promise. The new *Guide to Communicating about Food Poverty* has been developed to support more accurate and less-stigmatizing public communication.

**Noted:** AIOAF continues to deliver 10 newsletters and two events annually, and a new LinkedIn group is being explored to strengthen communication between events and improve responsiveness. The All-Island Food Environment Forum is entering Year 2 and aligns with

European Food EPI recommendations. The redesigned CFI programme also moves into Year 2, with priorities including a midpoint evaluation, Food Environment Team Projects and increased visibility among policymakers. Cross-border CFI partnerships have now been fully recruited, and relationship-building is a key focus.

**Noted:** *Transform Your Trolley* (NI) has completed its three-year cycle and is now under evaluation. Safefood remains active on OPIOG and has commissioned research examining weight-stigma discourse.

## **Overview of Safefood 2026 Business Plan – Corporate Operations**

**Noted:** PF outlined the extensive Corporate Operations workload for 2026 spanning finance, HR, facilities, ICT, governance and risk. The Board noted that the team manages a highly technical and operationally demanding portfolio, particularly during periods of infrastructure change. It was also noted that Safefood is increasingly reliant on nonrecurring Irish funding to sustain operational capacity, raising long-term sustainability considerations.

**Noted:** A NIST aligned cybersecurity audit was completed in 2025, with recommendations including strengthened firewall architecture and MFA improvements; 2026 activity will focus on implementing all priority findings. Safefood's Managed Service Provider (MSP) contract expires in March 2026, and procurement for a new contract is under way. The MSP played a critical role during the 2024 cyber incident, and maintaining strong external ICT support is considered mission critical. The ICT function has only two staff with significant organisational responsibilities, and the MSP remains essential to mitigate risks associated with sudden capacity loss or unplanned staff absence.

**Noted:** A new HR strategy will be developed in 2026, with succession planning identified as urgent due to forthcoming retirements and staff turnover. A new time and attendance system has been procured, and data migration is expected to present GDPR and payroll related risks.

## **09. Safefood 2036 Strategy**

**Noted:** JUC presented a comprehensive update on Safefood's first 10-year organisational strategy (2026–2036). She confirmed that the evidence gathering phase is complete, including a full mapping of Safefood's current functions across Nutrition, Food Safety, Communications, Corporate Operations, Research, ICT, Community Programmes and Partnerships. Each directorate participated in structured workshops examining current activities, resourcing dependencies, operational pressures, skill gaps and anticipated future needs. This material now forms the foundation for strategic analysis.

**Noted:** The external analysis indicates that Safefood will face a decade of uncertainty, shaped by climate related impacts on food systems, accelerating digital disruption and AI generated content, rising misinformation, shifting information seeking behaviours, increasing food poverty and financial strain, growing public health pressures, greater complexity in the

retail and food supply landscape, ongoing cross border political volatility, and stronger expectations for transparency and high quality evidence across government and civil society.

**Noted:** A formal scenario-planning process, led by an external facilitator, will explore a range of plausible future contexts—including high-misinformation digital environments, volatile cross-border governance, constrained public finances, rapid growth of AI tools, major shifts in food production and consumer behaviour, and rising public-health pressures. Insights from this work will inform the Strategy’s core pillars, expected to include Safefood’s role in the digital information landscape, strengthened research and data capability, protection of the cross-border mandate, long-term workforce and organisational planning, community-centred engagement, and a deeper focus on food poverty and unequal food environments.

**Action:** Seek greater clarity on what is being proposed as part of the scenario planning process

**Noted:** Once draft strategic pillars are developed, Safefood will engage extensively with stakeholders including sponsor departments north and south, North–South Ministerial Council structures, FSAI and FSA NI, the HSE and Public Health Agency, community organisations and professional bodies. Advisory Board viewpoints will be incorporated at both the pillar development and drafting stages.

**Noted:** Key strategic risks for the decade ahead include political volatility in Northern Ireland and its implications for cross-border bodies; workforce vulnerabilities such as staff attrition, an ageing profile and potential loss of institutional memory; operational instability linked to property transitions in Cork and Dublin; ICT and data-governance weaknesses requiring stronger resilience and cybersecurity; and the rapid growth of AI-driven nutrition and food-related misinformation.

**Noted:** The Board highlighted several essential requirements for the 2036 Strategy: workforce capability and succession planning must be prioritised; policy engagement must remain clearly within Safefood’s statutory remit; partnerships should become a structured, well-resourced strategic pillar with stronger EU and international links; AI integration should be treated as core organisational infrastructure; senior civil service relationships north and south must be strengthened; citizen voice and community insight should remain central; and the Strategy must be durable enough to withstand political change across both jurisdictions.

## **10. Tour de Table**

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

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. The CEO was invited to stay, given this was her first AB meeting.

Signed

---

Dr. Eddie Rooney  
Chairperson  
Safefood Advisory Board.