

Minutes of the 176th meeting of the
SafeFood Advisory Board
held on Thursday 19th June 2025 at 10:00 am
SafeFood Office, Cork

Members Present in person:

Dr Eddie Rooney (ER) (Chair)
Mr Alex Attwood (AA)
Prof Elizabeth Keane (EK)
Mr Tim Morrow (TM)
Ms Julie Andrews (JA)
Ms Irene Collins (IC)

Members Present virtually:

Mr Damien McCallion (DMcC) (Vice-Chair)
Dr Elaine Mooney (EM)
Ms Teresa Canavan (TC)

In attendance:

Dr Gary A. Kearney, Chief Executive Officer (GK)
Ms Patricia Fitzgerald, Director of Corporate Operations (PF)
Dr Aileen McGloin, Director of Nutrition (AMG)
Ms. Trish Twohig, Director of Food Safety (TT)
Ms Colette O'Shea, (CO'S) Secretariat

In attendance for presentations:

Dr. James McIntosh, Chief Specialist Toxicology (JMcl)
Ms. Angela Cahill, Corporate Operations Manager (AC)

Apologies:

Ms Elaine Clohosey (EC)
Mr Alan Lewis (AL)
Dr Kenneth McKenzie (KMcK)
Ms Fiona Gilligan, Director of Communications (FG)

1. Introduction and apologies

Noted: The Chair welcomed members of the Advisory Board to the 176th Meeting. Apologies were noted from Ms Elaine Clohosey, Mr Alan Lewis, Dr Kenneth McKenzie and Ms Fiona Gilligan.

Noted: The Chair welcomed two new members to Board, Mr Tim Morrow and Ms Julie Andrews. All present introduced themselves and their role and background.

2. Conflicts of interest

Noted: No conflicts of interest were recorded.

3. Minutes of meeting held on Thursday 10 April 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: AA

Seconded: EK

4. Matters arising from the minutes

Noted: No matters arising.

5. Financial Report

Noted: PF advised that Safefood's expenditure to the end of May is €3.294 million which is €25k ahead of budget. Our forecast for the full year is to finish within our current budget of €8.6 million.

Noted: A detailed financial review against our budget has already taken place by the Executive Board, with another scheduled for August. The Senior Management Team has reviewed accounts line by line to ensure accuracy and alignment with strategic priorities.

Noted: In response to a query, PF advised that currency variances can be positive or negative and are dependent on the exchange rate between sterling and the euro. Safefood receives its sterling funding in the latter months of the year and is dependent of the real-time exchange rate at the time of converting this to euro and is prevented from hedging against currency risk.

Noted: The CEO advised that discussions are ongoing with both sponsor departments regarding a potential adjustment to the funding ratio, currently set at 70:30 (Ireland: Northern Ireland) based on 1998 population data. A revised ratio of 73:27 which reflects the current 2025 population split is under consideration.

6. ARC Update

Noted: External consultants are being procured to conduct an audit of Safefood's cybersecurity framework in order to test and assess system resilience. The CEO and PF thanked DMCC for offering assistance from the Chief Information Security Officer in the HSE who has provided assistance with specifications for drafting the Cybersecurity Tender. He advised that the data governance review should fall under a separate tender. He also suggested that Safefood might benchmark itself against the NIST Cybersecurity Framework.

Noted: AA advised that Safefood has a Data Protection Officer (DPO) on an outsourced contract, supported by an in-house compliance officer.

Noted: AA advised that data protection training is completed annually across the organisation and that most staff have completed this so far in 2025.

Noted: AA advised that the Internal Auditor attended the last meeting and presented her report on the organisations internal controls and risk management. Findings were medium to low risk, with only a handful of issues identified. Overall, the audit was considered reassuring.

7. Chief Executive Report

Noted: The Chief Executive Officer's report detailed Safefood's activity since the last Board meeting on 10 April. The report was circulated to Members prior to the meeting and taken as read. The CEO highlighted the following items.

Noted: Safefood has launched a new project to formulate a 10-year development plan entitled Safefood 2036. The purpose of the plan is a reflection on 25 years of operations and assess how best to adapt to future challenges, consider internal capabilities (skills, structure, roles) and external trends (public health, food consumption, technology, media). It is intended that this 10-yr plan will support the usual short-term planning cycles. An internal steering group is in place composed of four managers, three advisory board members and the CEO. The terms of reference for the process have been finalised.

Noted: In May, the CEO and AB Chairperson reported to the NSMC Health Sectoral Meeting, attended by both Health Ministers. A Safefood presentation was given on the new Community Food Initiative (CFI) programme - now supporting 28 community groups (10 in Northern Ireland, 18 in Ireland). Safefood's 2025 Business Plan was approved, and all legacy corporate and business plans (since 2019) were approved or noted.

Noted: The final draft of the Corporate Plan 2026-2028 is being developed, and the Senior Management Team have reviewed the facilitator's insights and are refining Safefood's vision, mission, values and objectives. The Corporate Plan will be submitted to sponsor departments for approval in August.

Noted: The HR and Administration Executive post (vacant for several years) has been advertised with a closing date of 4th July. This is the second of the 4 regraded posts to be filled on a permanent basis. The Finance post is filled under temporary contract until April 2026, and the Compliance post is filled under temporary contract until August 2026.

Noted: The CEO and directors of Corporate Operations and Communications met with the Minister of State at the Department of Health with special responsibility for Public Health, Well Being and the National Drugs Strategy, Jennifer Murnane O'Connor to introduce Safefood and its operations. It should be noted that in Ireland public health is managed by junior ministers, while in Northern Ireland, responsibilities are structured differently.

Noted: Safefood's upcoming Food Safety Campaign will target domestic kitchens, focusing on avoiding cross-contamination when handling chicken. A previously used UV light ad will again be presented to visually demonstrate hygiene risks due to *Campylobacter* contamination in chicken. This latter aspect causes the bulk of reported food poisoning across both jurisdictions each year. The campaign will be supported by press and media outreach from the Food Safety and Communications teams. This campaign emphasises repetition of core public health messages for new and inexperienced home cooks.

Noted: The All-Island Food Poverty Network meets five times annually: two jurisdictional meetings per region (online and in-person) and one all-island event. The network is a critical platform for collaboration, capacity building, and sharing insights on food poverty.

Noted: The Community Food Initiatives (CFI) new cycle will expand to 28 groups (up from 13). High-quality applications were received with strong cross-border collaboration included. The mandatory focus is on local food environments.

Noted: Safefood has a long-standing partnership with the Irish Football Association (IFA) delivering the *On the Ball* nutrition programme for children aged 8–10. The areas of focus include healthy eating and hydration. Recent collaboration with Windsor Park's catering team has led to incremental improvements in food offerings (e.g., vending machines).

Noted: Food Allergy Training in Northern Ireland is ongoing in collaboration with all Northern Ireland councils to deliver free training for food businesses (focused on food safety and allergen management) and public sessions for individuals with food allergies and their families, including clinical insights and practical advice.

Noted: Safefood participated in the Environmental Health Association of Ireland Forum. Safefood continues its engagement with EHOs across both jurisdictions to strengthen cross-border collaboration and outbreak response. Safefood also supports EHO student placements in Northern Ireland.

Noted: The current lease for the Cork Office was signed in 2001 for 25 years and will expire in June 2026. A business case for the Cork offices from 2026 is being finalised and will be submitted to sponsor departments by mid-July.

Noted: The CEO announced that he will retire at the end of the year after nearly 25 years of service. The Chair advised that the board would discuss succession planning in a closed session.

Noted: The CEO gave special thanks to CO'S for her exceptional support in managing meeting logistics and taking on extra Board responsibilities alongside her regular duties.

8. HR Strategy Presentation

Noted: AC gave a presentation to the Board on Safefood's HR Strategy and outlined Safefood's People Strategy, focusing on HR challenges, workforce demographics, policy frameworks, and employee support initiatives.

Noted: Safefood's people strategy emphasises staff support and wellbeing. Comprehensive policies are in place covering leave, working arrangements, equality, conduct, ICT, travel, recruitment, retirement, learning and development, and wellbeing.

Noted: Safefood's Wellbeing Initiatives include monthly newsletters, health webinars, safety talks, staff recognition, blood donation drives, and wellness programs such as "Psyched Workplace" and lunch-and-learn sessions.

9. Food allergy and intolerance: ‘Making a difference’

Noted: JMcl gave a presentation on Safefood’s work in the area of food allergy, food intolerance & coeliac disease. Food allergy and intolerance affects a minimum of 15% of the population on the island of Ireland.

Noted: Safefood continues to promote awareness of these conditions across a range of audiences and environments and provides training and resources to upskill people in food allergen management.

Noted: The allergen labelling requirements of the EU Food Information to Consumers legislation continues to be problematic in the catering and hospitality sector ten years since it came into force.

Noted: Safefood’s future focus will be to continue to collaborate with stakeholders (including the Community and Voluntary sector) to increase the background level of awareness and knowledge of food hypersensitivity in the general community and continue to work with regulatory agencies and others to improve consumer protection in the food sector.

10. Tour de Table

The CEO advised that the next Board meeting will take place on Thursday 18th September in Safefood’s Dublin Office.

11. Meeting of Advisory Board members – without Executive present

Noted: Advisory Board members discussed emerging challenges for the current year.

Signed

Dr. Eddie Rooney
Chairperson
Safefood Advisory Board.