

Audit of inequalities and S75 action plan: January 2023 – December 2025



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To improve public health and well-being, by promoting food safety and healthy eating on the island of Ireland.

This document is available in a range of formats on request.

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1 Audit of Inequalities

Purpose of Audit

The **safefood** Equality Scheme contains a commitment to carry out an Audit of Inequalities and to review this in line with its Equality Scheme schedules. The current Scheme was approved by the Equality Commission on 14 September 2011 and revised in September 2017. A further review will take place in September 2023.

Section 75(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 states that in carrying out functions relating to Northern Ireland, public bodies such as **safefood** are required to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between:

- persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation
- men and women generally
- persons with a disability and persons without
- persons with dependants and persons without.

Section 75(2) of the Act states that in addition and without prejudice to the obligations above, **safefood** is required to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group when carrying out its functions in relation to Northern Ireland.

Under these provisions **safefood** is required to develop an Equality Scheme. This Scheme is reviewed on a five-year basis and as part of the review and, as recommended by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, **safefood** should take a systematic approach to examining its functions and how these relate to the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations by undertaking an Audit of Inequalities. The audit can be used by a public authority to inform its work in relation to the Section 75 equality and good relations duties. It can also enable public authorities to assess progress on the implementation of the Section 75 statutory duties as it provides baseline information on existing inequalities relevant to a public authority's functions.

As part of this approach, it is recommended that **safefood**, where inequalities have been identified, develop action plans to promote equality of opportunity and good relations which are based on the context of their functions, linked to achievable outcomes, and are implemented through the framework of the equality scheme. It is recommended that action plans to promote equality of opportunity and good relations should be informed by an analysis of the inequalities that exist for those Section 75 categories affected by the functions of **safefood**.

In preparing the action plans **safefood** undertook an audit of inequalities to identify the range of key inequalities which the implementation of **safefood**'s functions is likely to address, developed action plans based on functions and key inequalities identified, prioritised those actions which should have the most impact on inequalities and developed timescales for implementation of these action plans.

safefood – its origins and functions

safefood is a North-South Body, responsible for the promotion of food safety and healthy eating on the island of Ireland. It was established in 1999 under the terms of the British-Irish Agreement Act 1999 and the North-South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) Northern Ireland Order 1999. The establishing legislation provides for:

- the promotion of food safety.
- research into food safety.
- the promotion of scientific cooperation and linkages between laboratories.
- surveillance of food-borne diseases.
- the development of cost-effective facilities for specialised laboratory testing.

There is also a requirement to provide advice of the nutritional aspects of various foods.

Funding is provided by the Oireachtas in Ireland and by the Northern Ireland Assembly. Seventy per cent of the funding is provided by the Department of Health in Ireland (DOHI), and the balance (thirty per cent) is provided by the Department of Health in Northern Ireland (DOHNI).

The functions of the Body are carried out by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) under the policy direction of the North-South Ministerial Council (NSMC). There is a twelve-member Advisory Board and a **safefood** Advisory Committee (SAC) to assist and advise the CEO in the discharge of **safefood**'s functions. Members of the Advisory Board and the Advisory Committee are

appointed by the NSMC. Members of the Advisory Committee include experts with a broad range of professional expertise, experience and backgrounds.

Background to *safefood*

safefood's role is to promote food safety and provide nutritional advice on the island of Ireland in accordance with its legislative remit. This is achieved by building an evidence base of sound and authoritative science that is used to influence policy and to promote behaviour change in the overall interests of improved public health. *safefood* has made it a priority to work in partnership with key stakeholders on the island of Ireland and to utilise innovative approaches to support it in:

- communicating clearly, in a direct and supportive manner,
- promoting a better understanding of food safety, nutrition, and healthy eating, and,
- encouraging healthier, safer, and sustainable food choices by consumers and those involved in the food chain.

People and the food environment on the island of Ireland are at the centre of both the vision and mission of *safefood* and it uses best practice, including behaviour change theory and techniques, to develop targeted messages to further educate, inform, and motivate people to put food safety and healthy eating at the core of their lifestyle choices. It seeks to systematically use behaviour change techniques, market research and message authentication techniques involving the target audience across the development and evaluation of its work to ensure that it brings relevant, practical, targeted, and timely information to the public. It strives to create messages and develop initiatives that are rooted in the everyday lives of its target audiences and communicate with people in the context of what matters to them regarding food and health.

Functions that do not apply to *safefood*

safefood is a small public body with headquarters in Cork and does not have employees in Northern Ireland. It is not a health provider, and it does not provide direct services to the public in Northern Ireland. Its primary role is to commission research, disseminate information and promote awareness of food safety and healthy eating throughout the island of Ireland. Therefore, the areas of inequality that have emerged from this audit do not closely

match those which traditionally emerge from large health providers in Northern Ireland – i.e., they exclude concerns re employment or direct service provision.

Gathering of Information

This Audit of Inequalities will gather and analyse information across a range of sources of statistical information, both internal and external, to identify any inequalities that exist for service users and those affected by **safefood**'s policies. Sources of information included:

- 2021 Healthy Ireland Survey
- Health Survey Northern Ireland: First Results 2020/21
- [Health Inequalities Annual Report 2022 \(NI\)](#)
- [Food poverty Government programmes, schemes, and supports](#)
- [Childhood obesity Surveillance Initiative \(COSI\)](#)
- [Survey on Income and Living Conditions \(SILC\) 2021](#)
- [Food security in Northern Ireland](#)
- **safefood**'s Corporate Plan 2023-2025 and 2022 Business Plan
- Internal Reviews, Consultations, Screening Reports and Equality Impact Assessments (including Proposed amendments to the North-South Pension Scheme, Weigh to Live resource, **safefood** for Life resource, eLearning modules, Community Food Initiatives Programme, Knowledge Networks Programme, Digital Strategy 2022-2024)

Data and key findings/observations were then analysed to identify any existing or potential inequalities. Opportunities to promote equal opportunities and/or good community relations were identified and recorded. Possible solutions or mitigation about any identified inequality were also identified and recorded.

Current position and challenges for *safefood*

Food safety and healthy eating continue to be of increasing national and international importance from a health perspective and underpin **safefood**'s approach to delivering targeted consumer supports. The current obesity epidemic on the island of Ireland poses a major public health challenge. Significant global events (Russia's invasion of the Ukraine, fuel inflation, supply chain disruption and Global warming) are contributing to inflationary pressures leading to increasing food poverty and food insecurity.

safefood's research and work has highlighted the various political, economic, social, and technological issues that impact on its key objectives. Examples of such issues are:

- Developing a complementary and collaborative approach in public health with the many stakeholders on the island of Ireland.
- In the wider economic and social environment, commercial interests of food producers do not always support safe and healthy food choices. For example, many foods which are affordable, contain high levels of sugar, salt and fat and often portion sizes are too large.
- The numbers of people experiencing excess weight and obesity continues to increase.
- Confusion for people suffering from information overload whereby they are bombarded with information from a myriad of sources, sometimes presenting false or misleading information. This makes it more challenging for **safefood** to get messages to people to support them to make safer and healthier food choices.
- Inequalities in access to a healthy diet are issues for a significant proportion of the population on the island of Ireland. It is important that the needs of the disadvantaged groups on the island of Ireland are addressed.
- The impact of technology on consumer behaviour, e.g., media and digital messaging on parenting, treat culture etc. can lead to confusion among consumers around what foods to buy and impact on **safefood**'s ability to communicate clear messages on safe and healthy eating.
- When developing campaign strategies, **safefood** needs to recognise the importance of smart phone ownership, device reliance, ad blocking on digital media, social media algorithms, etc.

People make healthier and safer food choices when living in an environment that supports these choices. Responding to these challenges, **safefood** will strive to create messages and develop initiatives that are rooted in the everyday lives of our target audiences and communicate with people in the context of what matters to them regarding food and health.

Importance of Nutrition and Food Safety to Health

Obesity is a progressive, chronic, and complex disease affecting people of all ages, genders, race, with or without disabilities and with or without dependants. It is associated with other chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, several

types of cancer, pain, and musculoskeletal disorders. Children who have overweight or obesity may also experience social consequences, such as bullying, stigmatization and exclusion.

Many, many factors are involved in the development of obesity, whether in children or adults, including our wider food, physical activity and media environments, social determinants like education and income, as well as genetics. The vast majority of these are outside the control of individuals.

Research into health inequalities in Northern Ireland reveals certain equality groups are more inclined to predominate at the lower socio-economic levels for example men, people with disabilities, young people, young mothers. Historically, Roman Catholics have been associated with greater social disadvantages than Protestants (for example. unemployment differentials). Whilst there has been a general convergence of employment activity levels between the two groups, other research looking at residential segregation, for example, shows that segregation still exists with different experiences felt by the two communities. It would therefore be prudent to take an umbrella view that poverty and disadvantage affects all communities within Northern Ireland.

There are many factors that increase the risk of falling into poverty, the main risks being childhood factors such as childhood poverty and parental qualifications and family factors such as family breakdown. In addition, disability, labour market factors such as worklessness, personal and parental drug and alcohol addiction, living in rural areas, debt and ethnicity were identified as factors. It shows that certain groups of people face a much higher risk of living in poverty than others, including children, those living with a disability and those in low-paid work of all family types, 'couples without children' had the lowest risk of being in relative poverty (BHC), at 9%. '[A scoping review of the literature on poverty in Northern Ireland December 2021](#)' Published by the Department for Communities showed the family type at the highest risk was single with children, at 34%.

The Community Food Initiative (CFI) programme (2022-24) is specifically designed to target families with children with 13 funded throughout the island of Ireland to include both rural and urban areas. The evaluation of the 2020-22 programme showed that over 5,000 families participated in the programme. In addition, the Transform your Trolley programme in Northern Ireland in collaboration with the Healthy Living Centres Alliance aims to improve participants ability to plan, budget and shop for healthier food.

To date, 44 community initiatives have received funding and are part of a programme of support and shared learning. The CFI programme 2022-2024 will fund a further 13 community initiatives across the island of Ireland. The aim of the programme is to positively influence the eating habits of families with children in low-income communities. **safefood** will fund between 26 – 39 small initiatives each year related to healthy eating and cooking skills and a further 26 community wide events per year.

Inequalities in Access to Safe and Healthy Eating on the island of Ireland

safefood research has shown that the most vulnerable groups, and where there is likely to be inequalities in access to safe and healthy eating, are single parent families, older people, low-income families with teenage children, young people, and people with disabilities. **safefood** recognises that these groups are found in all the equality categories and that its communication messages must be inclusive. Food poverty and safe eating is a reality for many people on the island of Ireland. An example, of how **safefood** is working pro-actively to address these equality and access concerns is through its Community Food Initiatives (CFIs) which brings together NGO, community groups, government agencies and government departments on the island of Ireland.

Priorities for safefood

safefood's strategy is aligned with the targets set out by its sponsor departments. The strategy will specifically target obesity and will maintain an all-island focus whilst recognising that the two jurisdictions have different needs at different times. The initiatives will focus on those most in need.

The sponsor department targets are set out in their policy statements. In relation to obesity and overweight in the Republic of Ireland, the Department of Health's Obesity Policy and Action Plan 2016 – 2025 has set a sustained annual 0.5% decrease in the level of excess weight averaged across all adults and children. In Northern Ireland, the following targets are outlined in "A fitter Future for All – Framework for preventing and addressing overweight and obesity in Northern Ireland 2012-2022" and will be updated in 2023:

- Adults: To reduce the level of obesity by 4% and overweight and obesity by 3% by 2022.

- Children: A 3% reduction of obesity and 2% reduction of overweight and obesity by 2022

This will be done by creating effective channels of communication that empower positive behavioural change and where education and training will be critical components.

A strong communications programme supporting the increasing need to promote food safety and hygiene to consumers will be delivered. The emphasis will be to target specific audiences who are at greater risk of food poisoning in the home because of their vulnerabilities.

There are many organisations on the island of Ireland involved in the food system. **safefood's** strategy will be to work in cooperation with these stakeholders to maximise the advantage that a partnership approach can bring and build up relevant networks that can be used as a basis for developing policy and other interventions.

With this strategy in mind, **safefood's** objectives will be to concentrate specifically on:

- Early years where lifelong impact can be made.
- Vulnerable groups such as the aging population.
- Supporting communities that are at risk of food poverty.
- Identifying other groups at risk.

safefood aims to ensure that the methods of communication are equal and inclusive and adequately reaches those groups which experience inequality in accessing nutrition or whose patterns of consumption need to change to promote healthier food for life. **safefood's** evaluation has recognised that the groups highlighted are less able to access its messages either because they are disadvantaged or because of lifestyle or situational factors they are less able to make informed and empowered choices. **safefood** recognises its responsibilities to address its remit to all communities but is committed to developing special initiatives to address these groups who are most in need. These will form a core part of its action measures for the Action Plan.

safefood engages effectively with local community groups as well as national groups to take on board views on how best to promote nutritional and food safety messages targeted at people who have greatest need for this advice. **safefood** works on a partnership basis to ensure a comprehensive and fully rounded view on health and food safety issues is heard and

expressed. All campaigns are guided by informative research including with each target audience.

Where possible **safefood** engages in consultation with national charities, public authorities and government departments, awareness groups and focus groups across the island to inform development of its campaigns.

For most groups there is unlikely to be a differential impact on equality of opportunity given the very high use of mobile technology across the population of the island. It is anticipated that there will be a mainly positive impact by ensuring people accessing information continue to receive the same quality of service but also benefit from alternative ways to access information.

However, it is envisaged that there could be a negative differential impact for some age groups, particularly those aged 65 and over. Nevertheless, it will be mitigated by the fact that use of online, whilst being the primary channel for communicating, will not be the only communication channel. **safefood** will also continue to make information available in alternative formats where possible (braille, audio, large print etc.) including hard copy when requested, including information requested in alternative languages other than English or Irish. It is known from contact with relevant agencies and charities that people want to access information in several formats, and this includes those who have difficulties accessing information because of disabilities. **safefood's** website adheres to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines ensuring it is accessible to people with disabilities and an Accessibility Audit was carried out.

It is also essential that **safefood** continues to build its evidence base thereby providing solid scientific evidence that will enable and inform cultural behavioural change.

safefood is also particularly conscious of identifying other equality groups that are not necessarily reflected in the evidence base and research. The messages of healthy and safe eating apply to all groups equally. However, research does not reflect nor suggest any different impacts on some specifically identified equality groupings for example sexual orientation, religion, or political view. This is why **safefood** will work closely with local community partnership levels as well as national groups to ensure its message goes out at the ground level.

Good relations

S75 also requires public bodies to have regard to the desirability to promote good relations between people of different religious belief, political opinion, and racial background.

safefood believes by working towards comprehensive evidence-based research which allows comparison and co-operation across the island of Ireland, as well as working in active co-operation through local initiatives in communities in Northern Ireland, that it is contributing to promoting greater respect between the Protestant and Catholic and ethnic minority populations in Northern Ireland. This co-operative, collaborative approach is a hallmark of how **safefood** works.

safefood also believes that it has the potential to improve engagement with all the equality grouping categories and build better relationships with these groups and other key stakeholders. It also provides an opportunity to better foster good relations by focusing on ensuring that information is created to be accessible to all and where it is necessary suitable alternative formats are provided with clear advice on how to access them.

Conclusion and s75 Action Plan

safefood, in partnership with others, has a major role in communicating to influence change to achieve its aim of protecting and improving public health and wellbeing on the island of Ireland. The ECNI recommends that public authorities should review and update action plans over the lifetime of their equality scheme to ensure that they remain effective and relevant to their functions and work, and that effective monitoring should be considered at all stages of the implementation of action plans to allow for measurement and reporting of progress on their delivery. Reviewing the previous Audit of Inequalities, S75 Action Plans, Corporate strategies, business plans and key research has given **safefood** a solid base to reflect and continue to build on its work as it affects the equality groups in the categories covered by s75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

As a result of this exercise **safefood** has prepared a S75 Action Plan for the period 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2025.

2 2S75 Action Plan – 1 Jan 2023 to 31 Dec 2025

(NB: This Action Plan does not form part of the approved Equality Scheme. It is a ‘living’ document and can be added to as other inequalities are identified by **safefood**. The review of the audit of inequalities on which the plan is based is thus an ongoing measure).

Introduction

safefood's over-arching aim is to influence and change consumer behaviour in relation to food safety and healthy eating on the island of Ireland. Our mission is:

*TO IMPROVE PUBLIC HEALTH AND WELL-BEING, BY
PROMOTING FOOD SAFETY AND HEALTHY EATING ON THE
ISLAND OF IRELAND.*

safefood has promoted food safety and healthy eating on the island of Ireland in accordance with its legislative remit since December 1999. We have made it a priority to communicate positively in a direct and clear manner to move consumers and those involved in the food chain towards a better understanding of food safety, nutrition and healthy eating and always supported by sound and authoritative science. Our goal is to influence behaviour in the overall interests of improved public health.

The consumer on the island of Ireland is at the centre of both our vision and mission and will continue to be so over the period of this S75 Action Plan. **safefood** will build on our targeted and widely acclaimed consumer messages to further educate, inform, and motivate the consumer to put food safety and healthy eating at the centre stage of their lifestyle choices.

safefood is conscious of the fact that economic, social, and cultural factors continue to change over time, influencing consumer concerns and their perceptions of food. The food industry continues to grow globally, and from time to time, there may be outbreaks of food-borne illness or incidents that will further alter consumer perceptions and occasionally dent confidence. We will continue to monitor these concerns and will utilise our resources to

appropriately inform and, where necessary, reassure consumers so that they may continue to make healthy and safe food choices.

safefood is aware of the wider public health context in which we operate, and we will continue to work in partnership with Governments and professional partners across the island of Ireland to inform consumers of positive lifestyle choices to improve their health, particularly nutritional advice, and good food safety practice. We will continue to challenge obesity, to which the population of the island of Ireland in common with other western cultures is prone, to reduce risk of stroke, heart disease, diabetes and cancers. Our education initiatives will target the child, the parent and the teacher and our communication programmes will continue their aim to place the longer-term interests of the public at the forefront.

safefood will continually evaluate our programmes to assess their impact and ensure that the most relevant and practical research supports our communication. We will conduct this research ourselves where we feel it supports a need, including targeting research to better understand consumer behaviour and psychology as well as to enhance the food safety capacity of the food chain. This will enable us to plan our communication programmes effectively to achieve positive outcomes for people.

Through our Audit of Inequalities, we continue to be conscious of those in or at risk of food poverty and will have a targeted programme of interventions specifically aimed to support and improve the overall health of people. We recognise that we need to communicate on an equal and inclusive platform so that socially disadvantaged groups can become involved. Our role is to communicate. Through our research and our evaluation of campaigns, we have recognised certain groups in society as being less able to access our messages. At times, we will specifically target these groups who are either disadvantaged or because of lifestyle or situational factors are less able to make informed and empowered choices.

safefood has at its core an aim to communicate and empower. This is mainstreamed through our Corporate Plan 2023-2025. This document outlines the role that **safefood** will have in empowering consumers to make the necessary improvements to their choices and behaviour. Its core values of dignity and respect inform our Action Plan herein.

S75 Action Plan 2023-2025

Inequalities	Action	Time frame and expected outcome	Measuring and reporting progress
People with disabilities	<p>To ensure that the Disability Action Plan targets are met.</p> <p>To continue to review safe food information provisions to ascertain if more tailored communication approaches required.</p> <p>Campaigns, initiatives and strategies addressing food safety and health issues will give specific consideration of how best to reach this group while avoiding social stigma and blame.</p>	<p>This will be conducted over the period of both the Corporate Plan and Disability Action Plan. The aim is to remove or ease barriers to general communication methods and develop positive behavioural changes. Campaigns will be delivered over the period of the Corporate Plan 2023-2025.</p> <p>2023-2025 - This will be an ongoing consideration for each campaign, initiative and strategy.</p>	<p>Monitoring and evaluation of Disability Action Plan</p> <p>Evaluation of information resources</p>
Provision of accessible information services	<p>Pro-actively develop in accessible formats our Information, both written and web-based, to suit the needs of all equality groups.</p>	<p>More accessible information services for our consumers.</p> <p>Website accessibility and technology enhanced to suit needs of different groups. Ensure website continues to meet Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0 Checklist. Publish Accessibility Statement.</p>	<p>These will be on-going and evaluated throughout the three years.</p>

safefood is committed through all its actions to achieving an outcome where the eating practices of people in Northern Ireland and Ireland are safe and healthy. The overall aim of the action measures listed in the Northern Ireland s75 Action Plan is that they will contribute to this outcome.

In seeking to influence behavioural change for all, **safefood** focuses on where it is most needed - specifically amongst the groups mentioned above. Evaluation of all projects and campaigns is on-going to ensure they are effective, reach disadvantaged groups and are inclusive. **safefood** believes that its programmes and campaigns will only be successful if we consult with all relevant stakeholders on a constant basis and is currently developing a stakeholder strategy to consolidate and enhance our goals. As an element of our stakeholder engagement, we will engage with advisory groups in the areas of concern with a view to developing our campaigns in a targeted and focussed fashion for maximum impact.



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