



Minutes of the 157th meeting of the **safefood** Advisory Board
Held on Thursday, 12 May 2022 at 10:30
safefood Dublin office

PRESENT:

Dr Eddie Rooney (ER) (Chair)
Mr Damien McCallion (DMcC) (Vice-Chair)
Dr Sinead McCarthy (SMcC)
Prof Maeve Henchion (MH)
Mr Alex Attwood (AA)
Ms Teresa Canavan (TC) (joined remotely)
Prof Elizabeth Keane (EC)
Irene Collins (IC)
Dr Kenneth McKenzie (KMck)
Mr Alan Lewis (AL)

IN ATTENDANCE:

Dr Gary Kearney, Interim Chief Executive (GK)
Ms Patricia Fitzgerald, Director, Corporate Operations (PF)
Ms Fiona Gilligan, Director, Marketing and Communications (FG)
Dr Aileen McGloin, Director, Nutrition (AMcG)
Dr James McIntosh, Chief Specialist in Toxicology (JMcI) (Item 5)
Dr Ciara Walsh, TUD (CW) (Item 5)
Ms Alison Dries (AD) Secretariat

APOLOGIES:

None

1. Introduction and apologies

Noted: The Chair welcomed members of the Advisory Board to the meeting held in the **safefood** Dublin office and informed members TC was joining the meeting by phone.

The Chair welcomed GK to his first meeting in the position of Interim CEO and congratulated him on his appointment. GK informed that **safefood** was advised by the sponsor departments that he had been selected as the preferred candidate for formal appointment by NSMC following the competition in 2021 to select a new Chief Executive Officer for **safefood** and that he has agreed to carry out the functions of the CEO as Designated Officer until such time as the NSMC can meet to formally ratify his appointment. GK has also agreed to continue to discharge his existing Director of Food Science functions on a temporary basis.

Discussion took place in regard to the numerous staffing issues **safefood** are currently dealing with, and in particular, Members expressed concern at the ongoing vacancies in the Corporate Operations Directorate and the added pressures this placed on the remaining staff and the organisation to try to fulfil its functions.

Action: The Chair noted the concerns and agreed that he and the Interim CEO would raise this issue again with the sponsor departments as a matter of urgency.

2. Conflicts of interest

Noted: The Chair asked members if there were any conflicts of interest relating to the agenda. No conflicts of interest were raised.

3. Minutes of meeting held on Thursday, 24 March.

Proposed: EK

Seconded: KMCK

4. Matters arising from the minutes

Noted: The Interim CEO advised that two vacancies remained on the Advisory Board as the NSMC had not filled these positions yet.

5. Presentation 'Economic cost of food hypersensitivity'

Noted: Dr James McIntosh, Chief Toxicologist **safefood** joined the meeting along with Dr Ciara Walsh, Technological University Dublin as the principal researcher on the **safefood**

commissioned research project 'The socio-economic cost of food hypersensitivity on the island of Ireland'.

A summary of the presentation is as follows

- Food hypersensitivity is a broad term that encompasses food allergies and intolerances, and for the purposes of research it refers to food allergy, food intolerance and coeliac disease.
- The objects of the research project were
 - To determine the direct and indirect socioeconomic cost (including health) of food hypersensitivity on the island of Ireland.
 - To determine the intangible costs of food hypersensitivity for consumers on the island of Ireland who experience food hypersensitivity.
 - To estimate the prevalence of food hypersensitivity in Ireland and Northern Ireland.
- The principal instrument used for data collection was a suite of online surveys that were active from November 2019 until October 2020. 3,000 surveys were collected.
- The main finding of this research is that for families on the island of Ireland, having a food hypersensitivity is a financial burden. The main driver of direct costs were health care-related expenses, while food costs, lost earnings and missed days were also significant expenses for many of the groups investigated.

The Chair thanked Dr. Ciara Walsh for her informative presentation who also took a variety of questions from Members.

6. Chief Executive's report

Noted: The Chief Executive's report was emailed to all members of the Advisory Board in advance of the meeting.

Corporate

Noted: PF advised on the following work and issues in the Corporate Operations Directorate.

- **safefood's** phased withdrawal of the emergency Covid-19 Working from Home Policy is continuing and staff have returned to working a minimum of 3 days a week in **safefood's** offices since 2 May.
- The deadline for implementing a Blended Working policy which allows staff to apply to work from home is before the end of June 2022. A consultation with staff facilitated by a third party has taken place, which in conjunction with the supplied DPER framework is assisting **safefood's** senior management team in the drafting of a pilot Blended Working policy.

- The post of HR Executive remains open due to a lack of applications from suitable candidates. The Corporate Operations Manager with assistance from the Corporate Operations Executive Assistant have worked to prioritise delivery of essential HR functions. However, pending the extended leave by the Corporate Operations Manager from the end of April, **safefood** has engaged a temporary HR Resource to assist two days per week.
- **safefood**'s Finance Executive has resigned after a long employment with the agency. **safefood** has engaged a qualified accountant on a part-time basis through its internal Auditor firm (Crowley's) to temporarily bridge the gap. This position was advertised in April with a closing date of 13th May. PF informed as of today there have been no applications.
- **safefood**'s Corporate Operations Manager is taking extended leave from the start of May. The CEO advised the sponsor departments of this development at a meeting on 27 April. The Chair and Board members wished the staff member well and a speedy recovery.

Campaigns/Communications

Noted: The CEO welcomed FG back to **safefood** as Director of Marketing and Communications after a secondment to the Department of Health and FG updated the meeting on Marketing and Communication activities;

- The START campaign is now entering its final year and phase 12 will air in May. The Board are very familiar with the campaign messages at this stage. START will air across TV, radio, PR and digital at the end of May running into June. Messaging will focus on the tag line 'Lets go easy on the treats' and as a supporting PR hook Kantar data will be quoted -The latest supermarket shopping data, analysed for the START campaign, reveals that families with children spent on average approximately €746 on take home groceries in the four weeks to 17 April 2022. Of this, €159 (21%) was spent on foods like biscuits, crisps and chocolate; while €49 (6.6%) was spent on fruit and €37 (5%) on vegetables. This is an increase in spend on treats compared to previous campaign research (March 2017 to February 2018), which showed that families spent on average 19% of their food budget on treat foods, 10% on fruit and 7% on vegetables.**safefood** are scoping out the potential of extending the START campaign for a final year in 2023 to ensure continuity of public health consumer messaging whilst the 5-year campaign is being evaluated, and future campaigns and focus considered. Some queries and observations included;

- MH asked if fruit and veg could be repositioned as treats? AMcG informed the reality is parents and children don't see these as treats.
- SMcC referenced research which showed two thirds of the population are motivated by taste and not health and suggested **safefood** might keep this in mind which running future campaigns.
- DMcC wondered if obesity levels had improved or not over recent times - AMcG clarified that a recent WHO study had shown levels to have worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. DMcC also suggested that sugary drinks in sports have to be key in our messaging and FG clarified that the sugar tax had reduced their consumption somewhat.
- FG advised that **safefood** are keen to explore working with the retail sector as the point of purchase is where you can influence choice.
- The food safety campaign titled 'Trust the meat thermometer' will run at various junctures throughout the summer encouraging consumers to cook BBQ meats safely and checking with a thermometer. This will be the third iteration of this message, which will also be the focus at the RUAS Balmoral Show this year in Belfast from Wednesday 11 – Saturday 14 May. **safefood** will have a stand located in the NI Government space in the Eikon Centre.
 - SMcC asked if **safefood** ever hosted a stand at the BT young scientist exhibition? FG advised that **safefood** did at one time sponsor a food safety award but not a stand. SMcC also suggested **safefood**'s messages may fit with the RTE programme 'Brainstorm'. **Action:** FG to look into and consider this idea.
- Stats from the website and social have increased again for April. Visits to the Turkey calculator page increased over Easter. The food poisoning pages also saw increased visitors due to the increase in recalls recently. Two new podcasts were released, one on foot of requests from FSAI to cover the subject of foraging.
- **safefood** officially announced the continuation of its partnership with the Irish Football Association (IFA) on 3 May, which will deliver the 'On the Ball' programme via nutrition workshops, school programmes and festivals to an expected audience of over 3,000 children in 2022. The launch also highlighted the extension of sponsorship with the IFA as a patron of their Education and Heritage Centre (EHC)

at Windsor Park Stadium. Patronage of the Education Heritage Centre will deliver an opportunity to provide START information booklets to visitors, branding incorporated into tickets and interactive handsets, as well as the delivery of nutrition workshops for up to 20 visiting schools (>400 children).

Human health and nutrition

Noted: AMcG informed the meeting of the following work taking place in HHN.

- **safefood**, as part of the Dietitians sub-group of the DoH Food Labelling working group assessed relevant ROI dietary data to ascertain what foods should be used to test different front of pack labelling models.
- In September 2021, **safefood** relaunched 'Transform Your Trolley' for its second year in partnership with the Healthy Living Centre Alliance in Northern Ireland. Transform your Trolley is a community-based programme which promotes food skills and shopping on a budget. Due to the extremely positive evaluation **safefood** plan to run the campaign again in 2022 incorporating the learnings from the evaluation.
- The Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland and **safefood** co-chair the all-island Food Poverty Network, and which will be restructured in order to increase engagement opportunities for members within each jurisdiction whilst still retaining an all-island approach to addressing food poverty. As part of the restructure two new subgroups have been proposed - an Ireland subgroup and a Northern Ireland subgroup. The all-island element of the network will continue to meet once per year and relevant updates will continue to be shared with the new subgroups who will meet twice per year.

Food Science

Noted: GK advised of various activities in the food safety and research areas.

- The Knowledge Network (KN) membership currently stands at over 3,600 members with three editions of the 'Network News' e-zine published so far in 2022, with the next edition due out at the end of April.
- The first edition of 'The Food Chain' magazine for 2022 will be published in late May/early June.
- The KN Expert Group will meet for the final time on 26 May in Dundalk as the current iteration of the Knowledge Network programme ends in July.

- A list of KN events was circulated and included in the CEO report.
- The 2022 **safefood** research tender call closed on 14 April 2022 for the food safety and nutrition research projects listed below and evaluation sessions of received tender applications will be organised in the coming weeks:
 - Assessing Cost-Effectiveness of Overweight and Obesity Prevention Policies on the island of Ireland
 - Food messaging to children and adolescents – what works?
 - Applied interventions to promote good hand hygiene practices
 - Communicating food poverty – understanding the current discourse on the island of Ireland.

7. Financial report

Noted: PF presented the financial report for the first three months of 2022.

8. Any other business

Noted: No other business

9. Meeting of Advisory Board members – without Executive present

Noted: The Board met without the Executive present.

10. Matters arising from meeting of Advisory Board members – without Executive present

Noted: The Chair did not advise the Executive of any matters arising.

Date of next meeting: Thursday, 16 June 2022