

STATEMENT BY SAFEFOOD TO JOINT OIREACHTAS HEALTH COMMITTEE

Wednesday July 10th, 2024

Good Morning Deputies & Senators,

I am Gary Kearney, CEO at SafeFood. We are delighted to have the opportunity to make a presentation to the committee today, it has two parts – a short introduction to SafeFood by myself and then an overview of SafeFood's work in Childhood Obesity, nutrition and healthy eating by our Nutrition Director, Dr Aileen McGloin. Also present is Ms. Joana Caldeira Fernandes da Silva, our Chief Specialist in Nutrition.

SafeFood was set up as the Food Safety Promotion Board under the terms of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement as one of six implementation bodies established under the agreement in December 1999. SafeFood implements, on an all-island and cross-Border basis, policies agreed in Health & Food Safety Sectoral meetings of the North-South Ministerial Council, the most recent of which was held in Armagh on 27th June. Departmental responsibility rests with the Department of Health in Belfast and the Department of Health in Dublin.

Our headquarters are in Cork, and we have a sub-office in Dublin that houses our marketing and communications people. This leaves us with four directorates reporting to the chief executive. Our budget for 2024 is €7.9 million, roughly £6.8 million sterling. Funding is provided by the Oireachtas and by the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Oireachtas provides 70% of the funding, with 30% coming from the Northern Ireland Assembly. SafeFood does not have a direct involvement in public communications relating to food safety incidents and alerts as these responsibilities are assigned to the Food Safety Authority of Ireland in the South and the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland. We have a permanent staffing level of 30.

SafeFood has no function in the regulatory aspects of food; that is left to the regulatory bodies in the two jurisdictions. Instead, we have a broad promotional role. Our key function is to promote food safety as a responsibility shared by the entire food chain - everybody from primary producers to the public. The organisation is also charged with providing advice on nutrition. However, our promotion role goes beyond promoting just to the public and those who produce and sell food. We promote,

commission and fund research and also promote scientific co-operation and laboratory linkages.

Our governing legislation provides that the chief executive shall carry out the functions of the body under the direction of the NSMC, the North-South Ministerial Council, and I am assisted in this duty by a 12-member advisory board and an advisory committee of 13 members.

We operate under four directorates, two scientific directorates, one of which deals with food safety and the other with healthy eating and nutrition; marketing and communications because communications are a key aspect of our role; and corporate operations which supports the operational structure of the organisation.

Safefood's strategy links economic, social, and cultural factors that continue to change over time, influencing the public's concerns and their perceptions of behaviour in regard to food. Safefood monitors these concerns and utilises its resources to appropriately inform and, where necessary, reassure consumers so that they may continue to make positive healthy and safe food choices. We also use targeted consumer messages to further inform, support and motivate consumers to put food safety and healthy eating at the centre stage of their lifestyle choice.

Our focus has evolved from individual food poisoning crises and pathogens to an emphasis on the four c's, cook, clean, chill and cross-contamination in our home kitchens; from limited individual nutrient information to a holistic approach to the obesity epidemic; from bench research to applied and behavioural research; from mass media campaigns to multi-component integrated campaigns; and from print and traditional media to social media platforms. We are aware of the wider public health context in which we operate, and we work in partnership with Governments and professional partners across the island of Ireland to inform the public of positive lifestyle choices to improve their health, particularly nutritional advice and good food safety practice.

In addition, Safefood has promoted food safety and hygiene along the food chain through the establishment of an all-island food safety network, the Knowledge Network, a collaborative arrangement that creates and augments linkages across the island between food safety professionals. Many of these professionals, not only North-South but also east-west, do not get the opportunity to meet and share the

issues that arise. This network has been quite impactful and a great success over the years.

With regard to research, we have continued to undertake appropriate research and knowledge-gathering in order to address gaps in scientific knowledge related to our core areas of food safety, hygiene and healthy eating. This builds the evidence base that facilitates Safefood's communications to consumers and food safety professionals across the food chain. Our aim is always to provide messages that are supported by science and that are clear, concise, authoritative, relevant and independent. Our information must be accessible, accurate, and supportive of public policy.

I will now hand over to Dr Aileen McGloin who shall provide an overview of Safefood's work in Childhood Obesity and nutrition.

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to discuss the pressing issue of childhood obesity. I will detail the work of the Safefood nutrition team which focuses on two principal areas, Obesity and Food Poverty. These two priorities are interconnected, and are reflected in all our work, whether that's our campaigns, programmes or work in the community. Safefood also commission and fund research aimed at understanding the social determinants of health. Our research also informs the development of policies to improve the health of the population on the island of Ireland. More than ever, we understand the link between childhood obesity and food related illness such as Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and many cancers.

Now is the time for all of us within Government and Public Bodies to reflect. While much good work has been achieved, we are now at a critical point to develop and implement public health initiatives that will protect our children's health. Our citizens are supportive of these changes. Recent studies have highlighted substantial public support and readiness to tackle obesity. This would be through measures including child-focused policies, information and awareness campaigns, subsidies for healthy foods and collaboration between the government and the food industry.

Today, one in five primary-school children is living with overweight or obesity, according to the most recent World Health Organisation Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative. While that number has stabilised, the figure increases to 1 in 4 children in less affluent areas.

. Overweight and obesity has significant negative mental and physical impact on children. When it persists through childhood into adulthood, it increases the risk of significant, long-term health risks including Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, many cancers, hypertension, depression and premature mortality.

In the past few weeks, you might have seen SafeFood's latest campaign - 'Building a healthier food environment'. This is our new five-year public health campaign and was recently launched by Minister Colm Burke. This campaign was developed in partnership with Healthy Ireland, the HSE, the FSAI, and in Northern Ireland, the Department of Health, Public Health Agency and Food Standards Agency. With this campaign, we aim to raise awareness of the unhealthy food environment that we all live in, how this is harmful to our children's health and why it needs to urgently change.

Over the past 30 years, public health campaigns aimed at preventing obesity have primarily focused on encouraging individual behaviour changes, with interventions focused on ways to help parents improve their children's food choices. And while there have been some successes, such as reducing children's sugar intake, the levels of overweight and obesity remain high, impacting the lives of children, teenagers and adults on the island.

Over those same 30 years, our food environment has changed out of all proportion, especially for children. Scientific research in this specific area has also progressed and shows that it is unrealistic to expect our citizens to make healthier choices or buy healthier food when they live in an unhealthy food environment.

Our food environment includes the spaces where we make decisions about food and drink, and how these products are made available, accessible, affordable, and desirable. Our food choices are significantly influenced by physical, economic, political, and socio-cultural factors. To build a healthier society, we must therefore change the environment that shapes our food choices.

For a child, their food environment includes the foods they eat or see daily, such as those in shops, petrol stations and leisure centres, or on TV or smartphones.

Research we conducted with Ipsos before the campaign highlighted that more than 7 in 10 adults said they had seen unhealthy food for sale in non-food locations like bookshops or hardware outlets. Children are bombarded with marketing messages

for unhealthy foods – we know from Irish research that many pre-school children recognise unhealthy food brands before they know their ABCs. The food industry's aggressive marketing strategies directly target children, increasing their demand for, and consumption of unhealthy food. Children aged 8 and younger are especially vulnerable to this type of marketing, especially when celebrities or cartoon characters are used to market foods high in fat, salt or sugar. Last year, 8 of the top 10 selling food brands in Ireland were chocolate, confectionery, sugary drinks or energy drinks. The World Health Organisation has identified food marketing as detrimental to our health. This is a key area we must tackle.

We know from the latest research on obesity prevention the importance of local approaches to addressing obesity. Since 2010, Safefood has been working closely with local communities through our Community Food Initiatives programme. This helps support the development of skills and knowledge of food. Since its inception, more than 50,000 people have taken part in this programme. The main types of activities are developing food preparation and cooking skills with cooking courses; and also developing practical life skills such as meal planning, budgeting, shopping, reducing food waste and food safety.

We also fund research to gather the latest data to inform future programmes and policies. Our previous research into the lifetime costs of childhood overweight and obesity revealed a total lifetime cost to the island's economy of €7.2 billion euros, of which €4.6 billion was in Ireland.

Our research from 2022 looked at the factors that influence the food choices we make as families. Time, or more specifically, a lack of time was identified as one factor impacting food choice, particularly for one-parent households. The availability of free school meals was seen as a helpful initiative, particularly to free up household budgets for those on low incomes. Supermarket chains were also identified as having an influence on food choices due to the availability of store offers, special deals and vouchers driving food buying behaviours.

In addition, we currently have research on-going in the field focusing on digital marketing of unhealthy food to children. This project, led by Dr. Mimi Tatlow-Golden, uses a novel WHO methodology to monitor digital marketing and the researchers are

also exploring a children's rights approach to the development of marketing-related regulations and policies.

To support all of this work, Safefood works to build capacity and promote collaboration and cooperation through our long-established All-island networks on Obesity and Food Poverty. Over the past 15 years we have been bringing together professionals with particular interest in these areas, for training, learning and networking opportunities.

At a policy level, we have worked on new Guidelines for children aged 1 to 4 published in 2020 and developed Nutrition Standards for funded School meals that have been in place since 2017. In 2020 we completed similar work for the Hot School meals pilot which initially benefited 6,000 children and is now available to 250,000 children. This will progress into universal provision by 2030. In the Early Learning Services, we have also worked with Department of Health and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to produce standards for the sector, published last year.

At Safefood, our goal is to continue to contribute to the prevention of food-related ill health. Healthy eating should be accessible to and possible for every child in every community in Ireland. By building a healthier food environment that is enabling, we can ensure healthy & sustainable food choices are the norm, not the exception. This may require policy changes by our public representatives and greater availability of healthier products and environments from industry and retailers. Our current food environment today is harmful to our health. We need to take collective action to create a healthier future for our children.

My colleagues and I would be delighted to answer any questions or to provide further detail on our work. Thank you