

*Food Safety Research Requirements:
Development of a policy statement for the Food Safety
Promotion Board, Safefood*

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Food Safety Research

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Development of a policy statement for the Food Safety Promotion Board, **safefood**

I. Introduction

1. The Food Safety Promotion Board, **safefood**, is one of the cross-border bodies created by the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement. It has a number of functions to perform throughout the island of Ireland: promotion of food safety; research into food safety; communication of food alerts; surveillance of food borne diseases; promotion of scientific co-operation and linkages between laboratories; and developing cost-effective facilities for specialised laboratory testing. Each of these functions is further specified in the Agreement.
2. In 2003, the Board had an annual budget of nearly 9 million euros and a full time staff of 30. The Board has a research office consisting of one full time staff member responsible for an annual budget of approximately 1.2 million euros. It also has a Scientific Advisory Committee made up largely of scientists with expertise in relevant disciplines. The Committee gives advice on different matters including advice on the commissioning of independent scientific risk assessments; communicable and non-communicable diseases related to diet; the nature and scope of surveys; keeping under review the possibility of contamination of the food supply; advising on the scientific and public health aspects of nutrition and health as well as identifying knowledge gaps and research priorities. It is not involved in the selection process for specific projects, though it does advise on research priorities and gaps. Also committee members are often applicants for research funding.
3. The Board is not responsible for the regulation of food safety as regards either promulgation of rules or their enforcement. In the Republic, the regulatory body primarily responsible is the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI), operating under the aegis of the Ministry for Health and Children. In Northern Ireland, the body primarily responsible is the Northern Ireland Executive of the UK Food Standards Agency (FSA), an independent agency accountable to the UK Parliament through the Department of Health and to the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Moreover, the Northern Ireland and Irish food safety enforcement agencies retain a promotional role to support their inspection and enforcement functions. However, at the request of the North-South Ministerial Council, the Board may review and advise on the adequacy of arrangements in place throughout the food chain in the island. The Board is not a member of the Advisory Forum of the European Food Safety Authority, the United Kingdom and Ireland being represented by the FSA and the FSAI respectively.

II. Development of a policy statement on research

4. The Agreement defines the Board's research function as a general remit to promote research into all aspects of food safety, including

- (a) identifying priorities for research;
- (b) commissioning and funding research projects as necessary to fill identified gaps;
- (c) establishing and maintaining a database of research programmes and monitoring progress;
- (d) disseminating research findings to relevant interests;
- (e) recommending action arising from research findings;
- (f) maintaining links with international research bodies.

5. The annual budget for research amounts to around 1.2 million euros.

6. The Board now wishes to develop a policy statement (protocol) concerning its funding of research on food safety. This protocol should specify the criteria and/or procedures that the Board will use to identify priorities for commissioning research in the light of its functions. It should provide, in particular, orientations for early identification future hazards. It should also provide a framework for assessing the potential value for money of research proposals; guidance on how to ensure that funding is supporting sound science; and orientations as to how the Board's research office and Scientific Advisory Committee should develop their roles.

III. Lines of enquiry

6. The following lines of enquiry merit at least an initial exploration.

7. Relevant experience at EU level should be reviewed. Some of this may lie outside the food safety area. Contact should be made with key individuals, notably in the Commission and the European Food Safety Authority, to identify those fields, sources of documentation and relevant interlocutors likely to be most useful.

8. Relevant experience at national level, within and outside the EU, might also be useful but will be harder to identify. Contacts at EU level may permit some to be identified. Other international organisations may provide leads including the OECD, WHO, FAO, Codex Alimentarius, OIE. They may also have had relevant experiences in the context of their own activities.

9. The food safety objectives and priorities of relevant regulatory authorities should also

be examined with a view to identifying their implications for the identification of research needs and priorities (policy relevance). Beginning with those closest to home, namely those in Ireland and the United Kingdom, the examination should also extend to those responsible at EU level and, in so far as possible, internationally. In depth discussions with the “home” authorities are probably advisable.

10. Data on food safety problems and trends, particularly within the island of Ireland, should be collected and examined with a view to identifying those hazards that are causing most damage to consumers, to those engaged in the food chain and to the economy as a whole (hazard push). Contacts with relevant authorities, including those responsible for public health in general, may be useful.

11. Conversely, current and imminent advances in scientific and technological development could be screened to see if it is possible to identify those more likely to provide realistic chances of major advances in knowledge that could improve food safety (science pull). The question arises of who, or what process, could do this most effectively. More mundanely, a process for identifying on-going or planned research funded by others would be desirable to prevent wasteful duplication of effort and even awarding funds for work already adequately funded by others.

12. Current trends in food production and distribution in the island could be examined to see whether they provide any indication as to new research needs. Contact with key players, including Intertradeireland, might permit issues relevant to both safety and economic development to be identified.

13. Finally, the question arises of whether stakeholder or even broader citizens' in-put or oversight is desirable and, if so, how best to arrange it.

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More information available on www.safefoodonline.com and other relevant web sites, north and south.