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Food Safety Authority of Ireland

2024

FSAI Conference

**Towards 2049: Shaping the Future of the Food
Safety Control System**

1 October 2024



Towards 2049: Shaping the Future of the Food Safety Control System

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Glossary

| | |
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| | |
| AI | Artificial intelligence |
| BTSF | Better Training, Safer Food |
| DAFM | Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine |
| DoH | Department of Health |
| DSA | Digital Services Act |
| EFSA | European Food Safety Authority |
| EHO | Environmental Health Officer |
| FSAI | Food Safety Authority of Ireland |
| HSE | Health Service Executive |
| NEHS | National Environmental Health Service |
| SFPA | Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority |

Foreword

On 1 October 2024, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland hosted a conference for the food safety inspectorates in Dublin Castle. The event was to mark the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the commencement of the service contract system of food law enforcement in Ireland. This report describes the proceedings of the day.

Reflecting on the many presentations, the panel discussions and the informal networking that happened over the course of the day, I am struck by the general agreement that, whilst there were many successes over the last 25 years, we must not be complacent. It was clear that we must all work together to overcome the challenges that we will undoubtedly face and to take advantage of the many opportunities that will arise or be created over the next 25 years. While there are many unknowns that will arise, the drivers of change are already either clear or emerging – many of which were identified over the course of the day, such as:

- The impact of geopolitical events and conflict on food supply chains and the wider economy and how we need to ensure we are attentive to any food safety risks that may occur
- The rapid development of technologies including artificial intelligence, data analytics and e-commerce will provide opportunities and challenges that the official control system needs to take account of
- That a more sustainable food system is required so we can live within our planetary boundaries with food safety at the core of that food system, and
- The increase in population, our changing demographics and greater expectations of society and how we reflect this in our control system.

Recognising these drivers of change, the Authority identified three themes meeting from the conference that will underpin how we should approach the future and optimise our food safety controls. These are:

- Greater emphasis on the collection, sharing and use of data to drive our decision-making and risk-analysis, moving away from inadequate and siloed information systems.
- Central leadership from the Food Safety Authority in ensuring that food safety is the priority in all our collective actions and that the service contract system operates effectively to protect consumers.
- Ensuring we keep up with an ever increasing food legislative framework – requiring compliance by food businesses and controls by Ireland's official agencies.

Since the conference, we have launched our new Strategy 2025–2029 which will inform how we face these challenges, embrace new opportunities and together with our partners in the official agencies, improve the system of controls so that we are continuing to protect consumers.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to the many external presenters who gave their time and shared their expertise during the day. They helped us to better understand the context for future official controls on food safety in Ireland. I would also like to thank those who attended the conference for their questions and contributions during the discussions.

Finally, I would like to thank the Authority's internal team who organised the informative event and ensured its success.

Dr Pamela Byrne, Chief Executive Officer

December 2024

Executive Summary

On 1 October 2024, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) hosted a conference in Dublin Castle to celebrate the 25th anniversary since the FSAI was established in 1999 under the FSAI Act, 1998 and the first service contracts between the FSAI and the official agencies. The conference entitled “Towards 2049: Shaping the Future of the Food Safety Control System” provided a unique opportunity for senior level inspectors across the official control system to engage in high-level discussions about the future of the food safety system in Ireland. The conference was attended by over 185 people representing Government Departments, official agencies and official laboratories as well as participants from other national and European bodies.

Colm Burke, Minister of State with responsibility for Public Health, Wellbeing and the National Drugs Strategy at the Department of Health opened the event by highlighting the continued success of the service contracts framework, which coordinates the enforcement of food laws across Ireland. Despite Ireland’s high food safety standards, Minister Burke warned against complacency, citing an increase in closure orders issued to food businesses in 2024.

Dr Pamela Byrne, Chief Executive of the FSAI, emphasised the importance of collaboration among official agencies. Reflecting on the past 25 years, Dr Byrne acknowledged the official controls system’s role in protecting public health, ensuring food safety standards for both domestic and export markets, and supporting a thriving food industry. She also recognised the need for continuous improvement in response to evolving consumer expectations and external challenges, including geopolitical issues and rising costs.

Some of the key themes from the event included importance of increased collaboration, sharing of data to support the evidence basis for our work in an evolved food safety control system and the expanding legislative basis under which we work. The conference was chaired by Suzanne Campbell (author, journalist, broadcaster) and was delivered through a mixture of presentations and three panel sessions.

Session 1: Reflection on the Last 25 Years

Dr Bernard Hegarty provided an overview of the evolution of Ireland’s official controls system, noting the increasing complexity of food legislation and changing consumer attitudes towards food safety. A 2023 survey revealed that most Irish consumers perceive food safety to have improved over the past five years. The session included discussions on the challenges of adapting the food

safety system to future needs, with panellists highlighting the importance of tailored enforcement, data-driven decisions, and enhanced collaboration among agencies.

Panellists discussed how the system has evolved to manage an expanding food sector and highlighted the value of service contracts and data-sharing in maintaining high food safety standards.

Session 2: Looking to the Future – The Next 25 Years

The second session explored how the food system will evolve over the next 25 years and what changes regulators must anticipate. Dr Wayne Anderson of the FSAI emphasised the need for flexibility in food systems and better data-sharing. Dirk Jacobs from FoodDrinkEurope outlined the key challenges facing the European food industry, including sustainability, new production methods, and the impact of digitalisation.

The session also addressed demographic changes in Ireland, with projections showing a rising, aging population and increased demands on food systems. Panellists discussed how technological advancements, such as artificial intelligence and digital tools, could play a critical role in ensuring the safety and sustainability of the food supply.

Session 3: The Next Steps

The final session focused on how the food safety control system must evolve to meet future challenges. Gail Carroll of the FSAI noted the commitment to food safety in staff in the FSAI and the official agencies that will be key to embracing changes in our food control system to protect consumers into the future. Senior leaders discussed the dynamic policy landscape shaped by sustainability, technological innovations, and demographic shifts. Collaboration across government agencies and food regulators, data-driven decision-making, and adapting to new technologies were identified as key priorities for the future.

Panellists also stressed the importance of proactive, rather than reactive, measures to safeguard food safety, advocating for a system that adapts quickly to emerging risks and provides effective oversight. The need for leadership and a cohesive “One Inspectorate” approach is central to ensuring that Ireland’s food safety system remains trusted and effective in the years to come.

In closing the conference, Dr Pamela Byrne reinforced the importance of innovation and collaboration in shaping the future of Ireland’s food safety system. She encouraged attendees to continue working together to address the challenges and opportunities that will arise over the next 25 years.

The conference was a valuable forum for sharing insights and strategies to ensure the continued success and resilience of Ireland's food safety system. A series of vox pop videos capturing expert opinions on the future of food safety provided direct insights from experts and highlight significant takeaways regarding the challenges and opportunities ahead for food safety in Ireland. To date, the videos have achieved over 13,500 views across social media channels, underscoring the importance of the work of the FSAI and the official agencies. The series of videos is available on 'FSAI TV' and can be accessed through the following [YouTube playlist](#).



Introduction

On 1 October 2024, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) hosted a conference in Dublin Castle to celebrate the 25th anniversary since the FSAI was established in 1999 under the FSAI Act, 1998 and the first service contracts between the FSAI and the official agencies. The relationship that the FSAI has with the official agencies through the service contract model was unique when established in 1999 and over the 25 years since then has ensured robust enforcement of food legislation in Ireland to protect consumers in relation to food safety and authenticity, ensured Ireland has complied with its statutory obligations under European food legislation for official controls and supported a thriving food sector.

The conference, **Towards 2049: Shaping the Future of the Food Safety Control System** provided a unique opportunity for management across the official control system to engage in high-level discussions about the future of the food safety system in Ireland. It aimed to reflect on the past 25 years of service contract partnerships, explore the evolving needs of Ireland's official controls system, and identify actionable steps to ensure that the food inspectorate is well prepared for the future.

The conference was attended by over 185 people representing Government Departments, official agencies and official laboratories including:

- Department of Health (DoH)
- Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM)
- National Environmental Health Service (NEHS)
- Health Service Executive (HSE) laboratories
- Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA)
- Local Authority Veterinary Services
- Marine Institute
- State Laboratory
- National Standards Authority of Ireland.

Other attendees included representatives from:

- European Commission
- European Food Safety Authority
- Coimisiún na Meán
- Enterprise Ireland
- Environmental Protection Agency

- Revenue Commissioners
- Central Statistics Office
- FoodDrinkEurope.



The conference was chaired by Suzanne Campbell (author, journalist, broadcaster) and was delivered through a mixture of presentations and three panel sessions:

Session 1: Reflection on the last 25 years

Session 2: Looking to the future – the next 25 years

Session 3: The next steps

| Time | Session | Speakers and Panellists |
|---------------|--|--|
| 8.30 - 9.20 | Refreshments and registration | |
| 9.20 - 9.50 | Commencement of the conference | <p>The event will be chaired by: Suzanne Campbell <i>Author, Journalist, Broadcaster</i></p> <p>The Opening Address Colm Burke T.D. <i>Minister of State at the Department of Health</i></p> <p>The Welcome Address Pamela Byrne <i>Chief Executive Officer, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland</i></p> |
| 9.50 - 10.30 | Session 1: | <p>Reflection on the last 25 years</p> <p>Speaker / Introduction: Bernard Hegarty <i>Director, Enforcement Policy, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland</i></p> <p>Fireside Chat: James Choiseul <i>Director of Food Safety and Animal Welfare, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine</i></p> <p>Tara Woods <i>Regional Chief Environmental Health Officer, the HSE National Environmental Health Service</i></p> <p>Jonathan Hoare <i>Senior Executive Manager (Authority Member), Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority</i></p> <p>Bernard Hegarty <i>Director, Enforcement Policy, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland</i></p> |
| 10.30 - 11.15 | Refreshments and networking | |
| 11.15 - 13.00 | Session 2: (3 themes listed below) | <p>Looking to the future – the next 25 years</p> <p>Introduction: Wayne Anderson <i>Director, Food Science and Standards, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland</i></p> |
| 11.15 - 12.00 | Session 2 - Theme 1: <i>Food industry - How the food industry expects to evolve</i> | <p>Speaker: Dirk Jacobs <i>Director General of FoodDrinkEurope</i></p> |

| | | |
|---------------|--|--|
| | | Panel Discussion: Dirk Jacobs <i>Director General of FoodDrinkEurope</i> Deirdre Glenn <i>Head of Food Start -Ups, Food FDI and Food Tech & Innovation, Enterprise Ireland</i> John Colreavy <i>Director, Meat Technology Ireland</i> |
| 12.00 - 13.00 | Session 2 - Theme 2: <i>The future environment</i> | Speakers: Pilar Aguar Fernandez <i>Director, DG Santé – Directorate F - Health and food audits and analysis</i> Dana Paraschiv <i>Director Regulatory Operations, Coimisiún na Meán</i> Frankie Kay <i>Chief Information Officer, the Central Statistics Office</i> Patrick Byrne <i>Programme Manager, Office of Environmental Enforcement, the Environmental Protection Agency</i> Q & A: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilar Aguar Fernandez • Dana Paraschiv • Frankie Kay • Patrick Byrne |
| 13.00 - 14.00 | Lunch and networking | |
| 14.00 - 15.00 | Session 2: continued | |
| | Session 2 - Theme 3: <i>Science, technology and regulation</i> | Speakers: Pilar Aguar Fernandez <i>Director, DG Santé – Directorate F - Health and food audits and analysis</i> Bernard Bottex <i>Team Leader Emerging Risks, the European Food Safety Authority</i> John Barron <i>Chief Information Officer, Revenue</i> Panel Discussion: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bernard Bottex • John Barron • Pilar Aguar Fernandez |
| 15.00 - 15.30 | Refreshment break | |
| 15.30 - 16.30 | Session 3: | The Next Steps |

| | | |
|---------------|--|---|
| | | Introduction: Gail Carroll <i>Director, Regulatory Affairs and Compliance Building, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland</i> |
| | Senior Leaders' Panel: <i>In an evolving food system, how are we going to embrace changes?</i> | Panel Discussion: Greg Dempsey <i>Deputy Secretary General, the Department of Health</i> Pamela Byrne <i>Chief Executive Officer, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland</i> James Choiseul <i>Director of Food Safety and Animal Welfare, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine</i> Catherine Cosgrove <i>Regional Chief Environmental Health Officer, the HSE National Environmental Health Service</i> Rob Doyle <i>Director of Laboratories, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine</i> Jonathan Hoare <i>Senior Executive Manager (Authority Member), the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority</i> |
| 16.30 - 16.45 | Closing Remarks | Pamela Byrne <i>Chief Executive Officer, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland</i> |
| 16.45 - 18.15 | Networking reception and refreshments | |

Interaction with the audience was facilitated via several polls which triggered interesting debate and discussion. A series of vox pop videos was recorded, featuring insights from leaders within Ireland's food safety official controls system on the future of food safety. Key areas discussed included leveraging technology, preparing for new challenges, and strengthening the role of regulation and the FSAI in protecting consumer health.

These videos provide direct insights from experts and highlight significant takeaways regarding the challenges and opportunities ahead for food safety in Ireland. The series is available on 'FSAI TV' and can be accessed through the following [YouTube playlist](#).

By January, the short videos had already achieved a combined total of 13,727 views across YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn, reflecting strong cross platform engagement. This performance highlights the effectiveness of the recordings in raising awareness about the vital work of the FSAI and the official agencies, capturing attention from diverse audience segments.

Opening Session

In his opening address **Colm Burke**, Minister of State with responsibility for Public Health, Wellbeing and the National Drugs Strategy at the DoH noted the radical reform at the time of the FSAI's establishment with the introduction of service contract arrangements between the FSAI and a range of State Bodies (official agencies) for enforcement of food legislation. Twenty-five years later and this innovative system continues to serve as the mechanism for coordinating how food laws are enforced in Ireland. Whilst commending the high food safety standards that have been achieved in Ireland, Minister Burke noted that there is no room for complacency, particularly given the increase in closure orders served on food businesses in 2024 compared to the same period last year.



Minister Burke also emphasised the important role that food inspectors and laboratory personnel play in protecting the health of consumers in Ireland and consumers of Irish food across the world. The quality of Ireland's enforcement work gives export markets reassurance that they can rely on the safety of Irish food and this underpins Ireland's thriving food export trade.

In his concluding remarks, Minister Burke noted the FSAI's collaborative work with the official agencies to protect food safety as one of the mitigating actions set out in Ireland's National Risk Assessment.

Dr Pamela Byrne, Chief Executive Officer, FSAI, followed Minister Burke's address by welcoming all guests to the conference and thanking everyone for sharing their time and expertise. She began by noting the FSAI's vision for the next five years is 'Safe and Trustworthy Food for Everyone' and how the challenges and opportunities faced now differ from those of 1999 and will continue to evolve over the next 25 years.



Reflecting on the evolution of Ireland's food safety system over the past 25 years, Dr Byrne emphasised the importance of collaboration to protect consumers' health and interests in relation to food safety.

Ireland's national food control system has provided a robust food regulatory framework that has protected consumers' health and interests in relation to food safety in Ireland, by maintaining food safety standards domestically, in export markets, and for imported products. The national food

control system has been key in supporting Ireland's reputation as a global leader in safe and trustworthy food as well as supporting a thriving food industry of almost 52,000 food business in Ireland today.

Dr Byrne acknowledged the collaborative efforts that have enabled the FSAI to manage food incidents, navigate policy shifts, and respond to crises such as pandemics and cyber-attacks. She reiterated the importance of continuous reflection and improvement in the food safety system, particularly in light of evolving consumer expectations and external challenges like geopolitical issues and rising costs.

In her concluding remarks, Dr Byrne reiterated the importance of working together despite different legal mandates. She encouraged attendees to use the conference as an opportunity to engage in networking and knowledge sharing to foster stronger relationships in the pursuit of food safety and commented how the FSAI is looking forward to working collaboratively with the food inspectorate over the years ahead to collectively ensure that Ireland's food safety system is worthy of the precious trust consumers have placed in it now and to 2049.

Session 1: Reflection on the last 25 years

Session Overview

Dr Bernard Hegarty introduced this session by presenting an overview of Ireland's official controls system. Looking back at the last 25 years, Dr Hegarty brought the audience through what the system has delivered in terms of food law enforcement outlining changes and challenges faced now that were not considerations 25 years ago. Noting the crises and events that occurred throughout this time, Dr Hegarty also emphasised the increasing amount and complexity of food legislation that the last 25 years has produced.

Looking at consumers' attitudes to food safety, Dr Hegarty presented results of a 2023 survey where almost all consumers surveyed felt that food in Ireland is safe with 2 in 5 having no concerns at all and more than half felt that food safety in Ireland has improved compared to 5 years ago. Conference attendees were asked how safe they considered food produced by the Irish food industry to be compared to 5 years ago and as the poll result below shows 51% considered it to be safer than 5 years ago.

**How safe do you consider the food produced by the Irish food industry to be compared to 5 years ago?
Would you say it is...**



Dr Hegarty concluded his presentation by posing a set of thought-provoking questions for conference attendees to consider throughout the day: How do we develop the food safety control system for the next generation? How can we leverage and improve our existing data to guide our efforts and demonstrate its value? Additionally, how can we implement 'One Health' unless we operate as 'One Inspectorate'?

Dr Hegarty joined the panel to continue the discussion which was chaired by Suzanne Campbell.

Panellists

- James Choiseul - Director of Food Safety and Animal Welfare, the DAFM
- Tara Woods - Regional Chief Environmental Health Officer, the HSE NEHS
- Jonathan Hoare - Senior Executive Manager (Authority Member), SFPA
- Bernard Hegarty - Director, Enforcement Policy, the FSAI.



In highlighting some of the most significant changes in the last 25 years, Tara Woods gave an overview of the NEHS's role where they have responsibility for official controls in the largest number of individual food businesses. She provided insight into some of the challenges that the service has faced noting an increase in food businesses in 2024, for example, new businesses related to the expansion of the hot school meals programme. She commented that over the years the NEHS's coordinated approach and national IT system has resulted in a more effective and

streamlined service and improved logistics that can cope with the demands of a dynamic food control system.

James Choiseul (DAFM) provided insight on areas for improvement noting that the service contract between the FSAI and the DAFM is key to holding food safety together. Data collection is carried out in different ways; however, data analysis is not where it needs to be due to a number of challenges including limited resources and skills.

In highlighting things that have gone well Jonathan Hoare (SFPA) mentioned the benefits of the service contracts mechanism citing the relationships being built through both bilateral and multilateral engagement, which support a collaborative approach to building high consumer confidence.

Speaking about the best way to deal with increasing complexity in the official controls landscape Tara Woods (NEHS) spoke about the ways in which Environmental Health Officers keep abreast of the increasing volume of legislation some of which can be very complex. European Union Better Training for Safer Food (BTSF) involves shared learning with other Member States as well as training provided by the FSAI and within the NEHS. The NEHS provides compliance building advice and support to food business operators through guidance on legislation along with their enforcement statutory duties.

The panel discussion concluded with general comments from panel members on improvements to support food safety in the next 25 years. Dr Hegarty spoke about the need for tailored enforcement and relevant data. Other suggestions included increased collaborations across the FSAI and official agencies, vigilance and a deeper understanding of supply chains and emerging risks. This tied in with results of an audience poll as summarised in the below word cloud that asked “what is the most important factor in ensuring food safety over the next 25 years?”.



Session 2: Looking to the future – the next 25 years

Session Overview

Session 2 looked at understanding what the food system and the wider environment will be in the next 25 years and what we as regulators will need to do to adapt our systems to address the changes in risk to consumers' health and wellbeing. This session was introduced by Dr Wayne Anderson, Director of Food Science and Standards at the FSAI. Dr Anderson explained how the food system is complex like an ecosystem, which we are all part of and therefore, the changes we make cause changes in the food system which are often hard to predict. He emphasised that how we, as regulators, can't stand still as the food system changes or food safety issues will occur, how we need to analyse the data we have, and how we need to ensure better sharing of data across the food system to ensure a more agile and flexible response.

Theme 1: Food industry - How the food industry expects to evolve

Theme 1 of this session included contributions from the food industry in Ireland and Europe.

Dirk Jacobs, Director General of FoodDrinkEurope, gave a presentation entitled "The path towards safe and sustainable food systems". The food and drink industry in Europe has a turnover of €1,112 billion and is Europe's largest employer in manufacturing. Mr Jacobs referred to current challenges to the sector, including inputs, markets, labour and sustainability. Emerging trends including sustainability, new production methods, e-commerce and globalisation of supply may change the focus of food safety controls and regulatory controls systems will need to evolve to overcome these challenges. He noted that such controls should reinforce consumer confidence while equally facilitating the right setting for companies to operate in and innovate. Mr Jacobs concluded by highlighting FoodDrinkEurope's call for a European Union "Food Investment & Resilience Plan" to invest, amongst others, in risk assessment capacity, and identify additional opportunities to accelerate risk assessment and approvals for sustainable food solutions without compromising on food safety.

Panellists:

- Dirk Jacobs - Director General, FoodDrinkEurope
- Deirdre Glenn - Head of Food Start-Ups, Food FDI and Food Tech & Innovation, Enterprise Ireland
- John Colreavy - Director, Meat Technology Ireland.



From an Enterprise Ireland perspective, Ms Glenn began by saying that food businesses must be focused on the external market and need to listen to the consumer to have a competitive edge. Irish food businesses are a key contributor to the Irish economy, supporting thousands of jobs, and delivering sustainable prosperity throughout Ireland. The sustainable growth of the food sector in Ireland hinges on increased investment in innovation. New technologies and new approaches to international competitiveness that place a greater emphasis on innovative, flexible responses to rapidly changing market demands are required.

Ms Glenn also mentioned new functional ingredients such as alternative protein sources, personalised foods and valorisation of waste streams as some examples of innovation. She stated that it was important to build awareness, educate and ensure food safety was always at the core of the food business' activities.

Regarding innovations in the meat sector, Dr Colreavy spoke about two phases of the MTI research programme. The first phase (2016–2021) was focused on genetics, food quality and shelf-life extension. The second (current) phase is focused on sustainability and digitalisation. Mr Jacobs was asked about the implementation of regulation across Member States. He responded that there was a lot more work required in harmonisation of regulation across the European Union. Ms Glenn also spoke about the main disruptors to food production including digitalisation of food production and processing, new technologies that can support e.g. robotics, and precision fermentation. The panel also covered other topics such as synthetic meat, gene editing of plant crops and the influence of social media platforms.

Theme 2: The Future Environment

Presentations were delivered by:

- Dana Paraschiv - Director Regulatory Operations, Coimisiún na Meán
- Francesa Kay – Chief Information Officer, the Central Statistics Office
- Patrick Byrne – Programme Manager, Office of Environmental Enforcement, the Environmental Protection Agency.



Ms Paraschiv gave an overview of Coimisiún na Meán and what they do, Online Safety Framework, Digital Services Act (DSA) and the online food sector.

Ms Kay spoke about the historic Irish population perspective (1841-2022), Irish projections to 2057, and European and global perspectives. The Census 2022 data shows that the population has increased by 8% since the previous Census in 2016, to 5,149,139 people with the average age 38.8 years. Population projections assumptions show that life expectancy will increase to 86.2 years for males and 89.1 years for females in 2057. In terms of the future demography of Ireland, there is expected to be a significant increase in population, increase in older age groups and increased dependency ratios (although further research is required with regards to increases in dependency ratios as evidence is showing citizens starting to work later (as opposed to the current starting age of 15) and beginning to finish work later (beyond the current cut off of 64) which may impact these ratios).

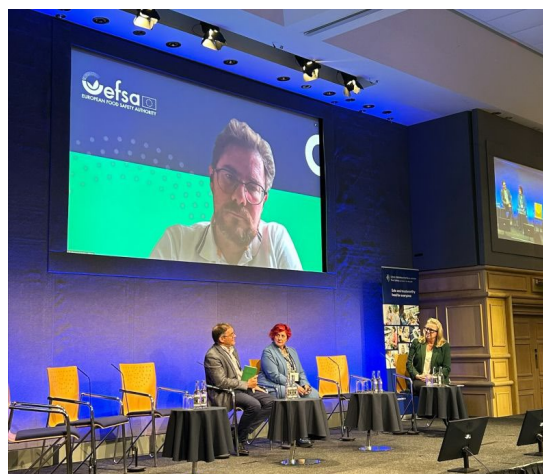
Mr Byrne described a changing Ireland by 2049 including a population rising to 6-7 million, aging population profile, more vulnerable energy generation, increased reliance on electricity for critical infrastructure and land use change. He spoke about future ambitions in terms of climate, ambient air quality, water and chemicals. Finally, Mr Byrne discussed the development of Ireland's first dedicated Sectoral Climate Change Risk Assessments to enhance the understanding of climate risks and opportunities and develop appropriate adaption and mitigation actions. The Sectoral Climate Change Risk Assessments reports are due in Q1 of 2025.

A panel discussion with the speakers followed.

Theme 3: Science, Technology and Regulation

Presentations were delivered by:

- Pilar Aguar Fernandez - Director, DG SANTE- Directorate F-Health and food audits and analysis
- Bernard Bottex - Team Leader Emerging Risk, the European Food Safety Authority
- John Barron – Chief Information Officer, Revenue.



Ms Aguar spoke about the need to ensure that the changing food system is capable of producing safe food and while the incidence of food illness has reduced, since the beginning of the century, there has been a levelling off in recent years. She expressed a view that the greatest risk is complacency. Ms Aguar also spoke about the concept of safe food now being extended in the future to cause no harm to the planet - the concept of One Health and one inspectorate. Themes also mentioned included how we will cope with a changing workforce and new technologies, need for additional robust but also timely delivered scientific evidence and the lakes of data which we need to learn from. Final thoughts included the need for creativity, wisdom and leadership.

In the second presentation delivered remotely, Mr Bottex discussed the concepts of environmental scanning, horizon scanning and emerging risks. EFSA has developed a global collaborative network for preparedness which involves early identification and analysis of emerging risks, trends, weak signals and upcoming policy developments. Some highlights of this work include antifungal resistance, microdosing, vector-borne diseases and climate change.

In the final presentation, Mr Barron gave an overview of utilising artificial intelligence (AI) in Revenue. Areas of focus for Revenue included document interpretation, image processing, customer service and customer compliance. Implementation of AI requires a level of discipline covering analysis, planning, development, testing, operations and ongoing maintenance. Finally, it was highlighted the importance of being aware of the European Union AI Act where a risk-based approach is warranted as well as being mindful of copyright issues, cost and green impact.

A panel discussion with the speakers followed.

Session 3: The Next Steps

Senior Leaders' Panel: In an evolving food system, how are we going to embrace changes?

In the concluding panel session, chaired by Suzanne Campbell, Senior Leaders had the opportunity to reflect on the evolving needs of the Irish official controls system as we navigate the complexities of the food safety landscape. This session focused on identifying key areas for action including fresh approaches to the official controls system, to ensure it is robust enough to navigate challenges and opportunities over the next 25 years, and what steps we, as regulators, must take to adapt and protect consumers in this rapidly changing landscape. The panel discussion was introduced by Gail Carroll, Director of Regulatory Affairs and Compliance Building at the FSAI who reflected on some of the themes from the day, and the commitment to food safety in staff in the FSAI and the official agencies that will be key to embracing changes in our food control system to protect consumers into the future.

Panellists:

- Greg Dempsey - Deputy Secretary General, DoH
- Pamela Byrne – Chief Executive Officer, FSAI
- James Choiseul – Director of Food Safety and Animal Welfare, DAFM
- Catherine Cosgrove – Regional Chief Environmental Health Officer, HSE NEHS
- Rob Doyle – Director of Laboratories, DAFM
- Jonathan Hoare – Senior Executive Manager (Authority Member), SFPA.



The first theme of the panel discussion was the food control system operating within an increasingly complex policy landscape. Policy shifts can be expected at both the national and European levels in line with the new Commission and European Parliament), SlainteCare, Healthy Ireland, FoodVision 2030 (and their successors), as well as responses to future demographic changes, a changing climate, and a growing focus on sustainability in food production.

Reflecting on this dynamic and uncertain policy environment, the senior leaders were asked what do they believe will have the biggest impact, and how should we regulate accordingly. In response to this question, Mr Dempsey from the DoH spoke about the uncertain landscape food regulators are working in with different challenges ahead including sustainability, new technology, changes in

demographics, immigration and consumer preferences. He spoke about the tension between food control and sustainability, the need to collaborate with other departments and importance of horizon scanning. From the DAFM, Mr Choiseul discussed the ambition for at least 7.5% of Ireland's utilisable agricultural area to be farmed organically by 2030 and his department's responsibility in supporting farming economy, laboratories and research. While it is important to balance all these responsibilities, the DAFM's priority remains in food and food safety. Mr Choiseul also mentioned the ambitions of FoodVision 2030 and how 180 countries import Irish food which is a major responsibility for the Irish official controls system. Representing the FSAI, Dr Byrne spoke about the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the European Green Deal and Farm to Fork policies. She spoke about the challenges in terms of educating ourselves about the changes in the food safety system, the need for sharing data and moving towards more sustainable food systems including the circular economy and reducing food waste whilst at the same time ensuring a robust food control system to protect consumers.

The second theme of the panel discussion focused on adapting and harnessing innovation to become more effective and efficient. Reflecting on the advancements in technology and innovation discussed at the conference, and in light of the Government's strategy for innovation across the public sector through the Public Service Innovation Strategy 2030, the senior leaders gave their view on the food regulatory system adapting and harnessing digitisation and innovation to become more effective and efficient. Representing the NEHS, Ms Cosgrove spoke about the ongoing evolution of the NEHS official controls in the 47,500 food businesses which are inspected by their service. She went on to discuss the need for all, especially those with responsibility for working with the stakeholders groups, to work together to support food businesses in relation to the increasing complexity of food control legislation, to ensure that the food industry, which includes large and small food businesses, achieves and maintains a food safety culture by all and for all, that Ireland can continue to be proud of. Representing the DAFM laboratories, Mr Doyle spoke about the potential of whole genome sequencing in terms of evidence-based decision making. He discussed the need for official agencies to share their data. From the SPFA, Mr Hoare spoke about their priority of digitalisation and the need to use and analyse data to empower the inspectors on the ground. Mr Choiseul also spoke about the need to upskill and provide training in data collection and analysis. There were also discussions around third party assurance schemes as additional sources of data which may be utilised.

The final theme of the panel discussion focused on embracing challenges and opportunities. It has been 25 years since the service contract system in food controls brought us together as one national food control system. The challenges faced in 1999 are not the same as those we will face moving towards 2049. A strong system of official controls in the future relies on our collaborative efforts to address these challenges and opportunities, protect consumers, and facilitate a thriving

food industry. Here, Mr Dempsey spoke about the need to be more proactive rather than reactive moving forward. Dr Byrne discussed the opportunity to bring about change and the need to think and behave as one inspectorate. In this model, it is important to capture data, critically analyse and connect the data to ensure a robust food safety system for the next 25 years.



Closing remarks

Dr Pamela Byrne began by addressing results of the last conference poll in which 80% of respondents agreed that our food control system requires an evolution rather than a revolution or no change.

Welcoming this result, Dr Byrne commented that it would have been encouraging to perhaps see a higher result for revolution noting Ms Fernandez' previous comments on the risk of complacency that can pose problems within well-functioning food safety systems.

Focusing on the next 25 years, Dr Byrne mentioned opportunities that lie ahead to bring about change, noting innovation and digitisation in the food industry and wider society. She also spoke about the complexities for food business operators and regulators and the need to keep ahead of these and ensure we have the systems to identify and address food safety challenges and

Reflecting on everything you have heard today and from your own experience, do you think our food control system requires:



opportunities. Dr Byrne emphasised the importance of thinking and behaving as one inspectorate with strong leadership across national State Bodies to respond to current and emerging food safety challenges.

Dr Byrne closed the conference by thanking the FSAI team, Minister Burke and all invited guests for their input into what was a stimulating, informative and thought-provoking conference Towards 2049: Shaping the future of the food safety control system.