

Report of the Independent Assessor for AGM 2022

IFST was established in 1968 and is governed according to a Memorandum and Articles of Association. It is a charity whose Object is **the general advancement and application of food science and technology, for the benefit, safety and health of the public**. IFST is an association of Members and all that we do must serve the Members since their roles, executed in a professional fashion, serve the Object.

It is the responsibility of the Board of Governors - elected by Members - to ensure that the Object is served. It is the responsibility of an Independent Assessor (IA) to assess the effectiveness of the Board in this role and report accordingly to the Members at the Annual Meeting.

Appointed as IA from Sept 2020 I have attended Board meetings and some Standing Committees and working groups. I am not a voting member of any group. I am grateful to the IFST and Chairs of the various groups who have welcomed me and helped me learn more of what IFST is achieving.

The Board of IFST established six strategic priorities designed to serve the membership of IFST and deliver against the charitable Object. The Annual Report provides the Board and Executives understanding of the progress made in these six areas. I will not repeat those. My purpose is to give my assessment of the Board as it continues to develop IFST.

Priority 1 - Providing and sharing evidence-based FS&T knowledge.

The Covid-19 knowledge Hub was an important, timely development. Learning from that has resulted in the Food Allergy Knowledge Hub and a Food Safety Knowledge Hub is being scoped for development. The Scientific Committee has a thorough and systematic approach to identifying issues requiring Information Statements, Fact Sheets, Webinars, Conferences, Access to trusted resources etc. Their concern is to ensure access to the food science and technology knowledge and information that allows Members to do a professional job in a professional way.

The range of IFST Members and Fellows involved in development and review of these materials is refreshingly adequate. IFST is delivering at pace and with quality the necessary knowledge on key issues that Members and the public need. The Horizon Scanning Report has identified further areas of work.

IFST investment in scientific team capacity, IT enablement and communications have combined to help deliver this important strategic objective. The number and standard of documents and webinars, conference sessions etc available on the website is impressive. The digital only *force majeure* created by the pandemic resulted in more digital communication, online workshops, webinars etc which has increased access to IFST knowledge and greater engagement with all stakeholders. However, the aspiration that IFST becomes the first stop shop for scientific and technical information on food and food production across the whole of the UK and beyond will require further and urgent development of the search capabilities on the website.

Priority 2 - Influencing and supporting key stakeholders

IFST has continued to make progress in reaching out to, communicating with, supporting and influencing key stakeholders. The 2021 Horizon Scanning report, Development of a Vision for UK Food Strategy and a consistent flow of quality scientific materials demonstrates the value of the Institute as a source of independent scientific information. The scientific capacity in the team alongside an active Scientific Committee and External Affairs Committee have resulted in IFST responding more effectively to key consultations and, as a result, contributing more effectively to development of policy. This is entirely appropriate for a professional body such as IFST. The increased impact factor for the International Journal is enhancing the reputation worldwide and is a tribute to the contributors and the Editor.

The IFST Board is guardian of the independence of scientific thought and quality of output and is thus key to ensuring continued dialogue, engagement, and open access to global scientific knowledge. The application for Chartership, if granted by Privy Council, will enhance this capacity.

Devolution will continue to be a challenge post Brexit. The IFST Board will need to provide strategic response to policy and practice divergence. Virtual working enhances the potential of SIGs and branches in the devolved nations to serve key stakeholders and members more effectively regardless of geography.

Priority 3 - Promoting professional standards and development

IFST is a professional body for food scientists and technologists. There are however many in the sector who are as yet unaware of the benefits of membership and/or professional registration in an ever changing commercial and professional environment. With the increasing number of Group schemes it is hoped that more organisations will see the value of ensuring that their technical team members are professionally registered and maintaining their CPD in an every changing, ever challenging world.

While some events were postponed due to the Covid -19 pandemic, the Professional Development team are slowly working towards Competence Criteria for the Registers and for Accreditation of relevant courses. The accreditation of short courses and an increased emphasis on Apprenticeships is to be welcomed. The code of professional conduct and disciplinary procedures have been reviewed.

As employment in the sector is altered as a result of Covid 19, Brexit and associated economic pressures it will be increasingly important to ensure that standards in the sector are maintained so as to protect public health and consumer confidence. The Board could usefully maintain scrutiny and stretch to make this programme more relevant for new entrants as well as current professionals and do so with some urgency.

Priority 4 - Utilising and growing the strength of membership

IFST is slowly moving closer to the target of 4000 members. 48 new Group schemes contribute to this programme of recruitment. Membership retention and student to associate transition remain a challenge.

IFST relies on volunteer efforts to populate its governance structures, expert working groups, branches and SIGs. Those who give most gain most. But volunteer time is a very precious resource and Members must benefit professionally from their involvement and service.

Members – whether in academia, industry, not for profit or government are individuals and will be looking to IFST for personalised responses to specific professional needs. Communities of support (regardless of geography or field of work) are important in an increasingly digital world of work and especially so for sole practitioners. The Board will need to develop a strategic response to supporting individuality alongside mutuality - especially as the pandemic recedes and a hybrid mode of delivery is anticipated. The launch of IFST Communities is designed to enhance Member engagement and provide more support through a network of like-minded professionals in a range of organisations. It is early days and this initiative has not yet reached its potential. The results of the 2022 Membership Survey should provide further insight.

Priority 5 - Encouraging and supporting future talent

In person education at all levels has been intermittent. Young people who are already well adapted to online work managed the launch pads, Ecotrophelia and other student offerings. The Student Committee remained active under energetic leadership.

IFST web resources have been used extensively and as education went online, nearly one quarter of a million visits were made to Love Food Love Science resources.

It is imperative that there is a steady flow of talent into the profession and to facilitate this the IFST Education work stream addresses all points of entry and the educational needs of each - schools, colleges, employers, universities. The inclusion of apprenticeships is welcome as is the recruitment of STEM ambassadors.

Priority 6 - Financial stability; effective governance and sustainability

The Board has been a good steward of IFST resources. The Finances of the Institute are in good order with a budget adequate to support the strategic objectives agreed by the Board. Under the leadership of the Hon Treasurer the Finance Committee have managed the investment of IFST reserves and ensured they are adequate for the risks currently in play. IFST reserves are invested in portfolios that have active benefit as opposed to merely doing no harm. The Hon Treasurer has reported to the Board in an open and transparent manner. The Executive team manage the resources in an effective and efficient manner in line with authorised expenditure delegation and provide full and timely reports.

Nominations Committee have been consulted on all governance positions in the past year with nominations and elections conducted consistent with the Constitution and Memorandum & Articles of Association. Board induction and training and a skills audit (last done in 2017) is overdue and will be urgently needed as several new members join the Board.

The Board has recently revisited policy and procedures in relation to conflict of interest and has work underway on how IFST can best maintain scientific independence. This Board does not flinch from addressing difficult issues and has the range of talent and skills necessary to undertake its responsibilities.

Conclusion

Good Boards are responsible for setting the strategy for their organisations, scrutinising performance, ensuring good stewardship of the resources, stretching the Executive team to deliver to their full potential and supporting them in doing so.

The IFST Board has reaffirmed the Strategic Priorities listed above. However the world has changed in the last two years and as the profession emerges from the economic uncertainties of Covid 19 and the ramifications of Brexit, IFST must flex accordingly. It has demonstrated its ability to do so but the pace must not falter.

Project Diamond has re-examined the governance processes and how IFST is networked through branches and SIGs. Equality Diversity and Inclusion remain on the Board agenda and as always EDI is a friend of excellence and never an enemy.

While there is a temptation to relax as we emerge out of the pandemic that would be unwise. The Board will need to be ever more purposeful in strategy and more challenging in the objectives set to deliver it while prioritising the use of the resources they steward. Each Member represents and reports on one of the interlinked Strategic Priorities but there is a collective Board responsibility and accountability for all of them. The Board agendas have ensured due attention to financial propriety and risks to IFST. Additional oversight on aspects of Professional Development and Education and Careers would be helpful as the profession faces into the current societal challenges. These are core strategic issues.

Adequate scrutiny, decision making and pace of delivery can be a dilemma for Boards that meet quarterly. The Board could perhaps be more nimble with shorter, more frequent virtual meetings.

The Executive team have responded well to some seismic changes in ways of working, delivery of outputs, working from home, staff turnaround and more recently a move to hybrid working. We are indebted to the team for their hard work and determined attempts to maintain and enhance our

profession. The Board now needs to support the team while at the same time stretching them to deliver maximum benefits for Members as they in turn deliver the Object of IFST.

In summary I conclude that the Board has fulfilled its obligations and responsibilities to the Institute. During another year of profound challenge and change the IFST Board and committed staff team have adapted rapidly to deliver above and beyond expectations. The delivery of that change is welcome but illustrates the potential to go further in delivering for Members and the public.

E Maureen S Edmondson
Independent Assessor
Feb 2022