1. Name of Governmental Department or Agency
Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI)
2. Title of the Project
Assessment of the Safety of Probiotic Foods on Sale targeted at vulnerable groups in Ireland
3. Description of the Project
This project will assess the risks of bacteria and their products used in foods and will underpin the development of guidance to the food industry on safe practice, thereby protecting public health. Probiotic foods are those that contain live bacteria at the point of consumption. In addition, probiotic cultures can be used to make biproducts which are used as ingredients without the live culture being present in the food product (e.g. acidified infant formula). The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) has not approved any health claims for probiotic containing foods. They are widely believed by the public however, as being beneficial and hence there remain many examples on the market both as whole foods and marketed as food supplements, often not meeting the legal definition of a food supplement. Some of these foods come under the category of foods for special medical purposes (FSMP) and some are considered novel foods. It is essential that food business operators who use probiotic cultures do so in a way that ensures the safety of the food as required in food law. This is especially important for products that are marketed to so called vulnerable groups (i.e. groups that tend to be more susceptible to food-borne infections and generally suffer more severe illness, because their immune systems are either underdeveloped as they are very young or impaired due to age or illness). Currently, in Ireland there is no guidance for this activity including, importantly, safety evaluation of the strains of bacteria or their by-products being used or hygiene aspects of their growth and incorporation into foods. This project aims to review the literature on probiotics, identify and evaluate the safety assessments of strains carried out by global authorities and use this information to assess the safety of probiotic foods on the market in Ireland and develop clear and comprehensive guidance for food businesses on how to evaluate the safety of their products.
4. Project Scope
The project consists of the following tasks. **Task 1**: A review of products available on the Irish market and to whom they are being marketed. This would involve examining the FSAI notifications database and conducting a retail level survey to identify products and cultures on the market that may not have been notified to FSAI. **Task 2:** A review of the literature including a review of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) Opinions on Qualified Presumption of Safety (QPS). **Task 3:** Production of guidance for food business on how to evaluate the safety of their products

The researcher would work closely with members of the Biological Safety team on this project. They would also liaise with members of the Public Health Nutrition Safety team in relation to food supplements, foods for special medical purposes and infant formula or follow-on formula and members of the Food Technology team in relation to novel foods.

5. Skills/Expertise Required

The skills required are as follows:

- Food Microbiology
- Gut health/microbiome
- Ability to review and collate the peer reviewed and grey literature
- Science communication (written and oral)

6. Expected Outputs of Project

There are three outcomes of the project.

1. A report on the evidence base regarding the safety of probiotic strains of bacteria for vulnerable groups
2. Safety assessments of certain probiotic foods on the market in Ireland
3. FSAI guidance note for businesses on the assessment of safety of probiotic foods plus associated communication aids

7. Working Arrangements

The placement would ideally be based at the FSAI offices in Dublin's IFSC area. However, flexibility to work remotely or other working arrangements could be considered. Any arrangement would require researchers to have access to the FSAI IT systems and to attend FSAI's offices as required. They will report to the Chief Specialist Biological Safety who will be responsible for directing the work.

8. Expected Timeline

The project is expected to take 12 months. The researcher could opt for a placement lasting either 12 months full-time or 24 months part time.