WHITEPAPER

# FOOD SAFETY AT THE TOP TABLE

FRESH **THINKING**

LRQA

Your Risk Management Advantage

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# INTRODUCTION

**Food safety is fundamental to consumer trust and business continuity, but too often, it is disconnected from corporate governance. As risks become more complex and consequences more immediate, this whitepaper explores how senior leaders can close the gap between operational control and strategic oversight. This need for deep traceability is reshaping how companies approach supply chain oversight. The complexity of modern food systems means that paper-based tracking and spreadsheets are no longer viable.**

Digital tools such as Internet of Things (IoT) technology, distributed ledgers for secure record-keeping and cloud-based Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems are revolutionising transparency efforts, enabling companies to track and verify materials throughout their journey.

# WHY THIS CONVERSATION, AND WHY NOW?



**Food safety is non-negotiable. For the food industry, it is the foundation of brand trust, operational continuity and consumer protection. But as risk landscapes evolve and new priorities dominate boardroom agendas, food safety is at risk of being overlooked. Now it's the 'sexier' risks – cyber-attacks, ESG regulation, sustainability performance – that are leading the conversation. They feel more urgent, more reputationally explosive. And in their shadow, food safety is often assumed to be under control.**

**That assumption is dangerous.**

In today's environment, the nature of food safety risk is changing; climate disruption is amplifying biological and chemical threats, global supply chains are becoming more fragmented and volatile, and automation and cost optimisation are reshaping production without always reshaping risk assessment. At the same time, modern media and consumer scrutiny mean that any incident can escalate rapidly, with financial and reputational consequences that extendfar beyond the factory floor.

And yet, in many boardrooms and executive teams across the sector, food safety still tends to be viewed through a technical or operational lens. In some organisations, it is embedded within functional updates rather than addressed as a standalone strategic topic. Strong historical performance can create a sense of confidence, and in the absence of traditional red flags such as recalls, silence is often interpreted as assurance.

To explore why this disconnect exists, and what needs to change, three highly respected leaders with deep experience in food safety came together at a recent industry conference. Between them, they have shaped policy, influenced boardroom thinking and led food safety strategies for some of the world's most recognised organisations. The panel featured:

This whitepaper draws from their discussion, which examined not just how food safety is managed, but how it is understood, prioritised and governed at the most senior levels of business.

This is ultimately a question of leadership. As Cliona Murphy put it during the discussion:

**"The board sets the tone and the risk appetite for the organisation."**

If food safety does not appear in that conversation, it signals a deeper cultural and strategic misalignment. It suggests that risk is being delegated without visibility, and that confidence is being mistaken for control. Food safety is not a box to be ticked. It is not someone else's responsibility.

The question is, are today's senior leaders treating it that way?

**Kimberly Carey Coffin**

Global Technical Director for Supply Chain Assurance at LRQA

**Roy Kirby**

Partner at FoodsafERM, former Co-Chair of the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI), and former Global Director of Microbiology, Food Safety and Toxicology at Mondelēz International

**Cliona Murphy**

Experienced board member (Chartered Director, currently Non-Executive Director at Bord Bia, the Irish Food Board), former GFSI SteerCo member and former Vice President Quality Assurance at PepsiCo

# MAKING FOOD SAFETY MATTER IN THE BOARDROOM

**Despite its critical importance, food safety often fails to register meaningfully at the top table. Even in well-resourced organisations with capable technical teams and strong historical performance, food safety is treated as an operational issue. When it does reach senior leadership, the focus is typically on lagging indicators like audit scores or recalls – metrics that offer limited foresight into potential risk.**

As Roy Kirby pointed out, every site that has experienced a food safety recall had been audited. Every business involved in a major incident had completed its testing. If these are the only signals being discussed by leadership, then something essential is being missed. “The problem,” Kirby explained, “is that food safety performance is being measured with the equivalent of fatality data. We would never do that in occupational safety anymore. We’ve moved on to leading indicators like near misses, training completion and observed behaviour. Food safety needs the same shift.”

At its core, this is a question of visibility and mindset. In organisations where food safety is elevated to the top table in meaningful ways, it is not seen as a cost of compliance but as a source of confidence – in the product, the brand and the ability to grow. These organisations are not just reacting to problems; they are actively managing risk in a way that connects technical rigour with strategic intent.

Cliona Murphy described the kinds of practices that set these organisations apart:

- Food safety policies are reviewed by senior executives and presentedto the board at least annually
- Food safety KPIs include both leading and lagging indicators and are integrated into broader enterprise risk management systems
- Board members and C-suite execs, when they visit manufacturing sites, ask questions about food safety, hygiene and controls, just as they would about health and safety
- In some cases, food safety performance is reported externally as partof ESG or sustainability disclosures, signalling its strategic value to stakeholders and investors

Crucially, these companies do not rely on assumed competence. They create structures that ensure food safety is discussed, challenged and reinforced regularly.

“Organisations where food safety is visible at the top are often the ones where it’s embedded in the mission, the values and the internal controls,” said Murphy. “When a business talks about selling products it can be proud of, that’s a signal. It shows what really matters to leadership.”

For Kimberly Coffin, the results of LRQA’s own benchmarking work reinforced this disconnect. “In some of the largest global food businesses we surveyed, there wasn’t a clear food safety or scientific voice at the senior leadership level,” she said. “Sometimes it was buried two or three layers down in the supply chain function. If that’s where the responsibility sits, the message gets diluted long before it reaches the C-suite or the board.”

When accountability is that far removed, strategic decisions are being made without full visibility of the risks involved; new suppliers are onboarded, automation is introduced, and production changes are signed off. But the food safety implications are not always examined with the same scrutiny as cost, timing or legal risk.

**The call from Kimberly Coffin was not for food safety leaders to be louder. It was for businesses to listen differently, and to build mechanisms that bring food safety into strategic focus before the damage is done.**

# WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE



**In food businesses where safety is truly embedded at the top table, the difference is not just structural. It is cultural. These are organisations where food safety is not seen as a barrier to innovation or a compliance function to be managed, it is seen as a shared responsibility; one that underpins confidence, reputation and the ability to grow.**

These companies do not treat food safety as a background process; they build it into enterprise risk management, they report on it externally and their food safety policy is reviewed and signed off at executive level and discussed at board level at least once a year. “Ideally,” said Murphy, “food safety is reviewed as often as employee health and safety, given the consequences to human life.”

They also think differently about site visits. Board members are not there just to look at commercial operations, they are asking about hygiene, process control and risk. And they look at performance through a dual lens: compliance and capability. That includes recognising strong food safety outcomes, not just reacting to failures.

For Roy Kirby, one key factor that distinguishes these businesses is diversity. Food safety can simply be overlooked because it falls outside the core expertise of many board members. “There’s a tendency for boards to focus on what they know,” he said. “You’ll often see strong experience in areas like finance or M&A, but not always in food safety. That’s why it helps to have a broader mix of backgrounds, not just in terms of demographics, but in the types of experience brought to the table.” Expanding this range of expertise, he suggested, can help boards engage more confidently and ask more insightful questions.

That’s why cultural alignment matters. In mature businesses, food safety is connected to the wider risk conversation instead of being isolated in operational silos.

These businesses also create space for learning. A mature food safety culture is not just defined by performance during normal operations; it is defined by what happens after a near miss or an incident.

**“When something goes wrong, progressive organisations learn from it and make fundamental changes. The ones that are plateauing or regressing just put a plaster on it.”**

*– Cliona Murphy*

Ultimately, what sets these organisations apart is visibility, clarity and ownership. They do not assume everything is fine because they have not had a recall. They know that silence can be a risk signal, and they have mechanisms in place to ensure that risk is seen, understood and addressed – at every level of the business.

# BLIND SPOTS, BARRIERS AND THE BUSINESS CASE FOR CHANGE

## If food safety is so fundamental to business performance, why does it still struggle to command attention at the top?

This was one of the most candid parts of the discussion between Kimberly Coffin, Roy Kirby and Cliona Murphy. It revealed a range of barriers that persist even in otherwise high-performing businesses, including assumptions, communication gaps, structural limitations and cultural resistance.

One of the most common blind spots is the belief that no news is good news. “There’s often a belief that because there hasn’t been a recall, everything must be fine,” said Murphy. “But that kind of thinking ignores how quickly risk profiles can shift, especially when the business is making changes in supply chain, cost structures or production methods.” When silence is interpreted as assurance, warning signs are often missed.

Another common blind spot is the belief that food safety is being taken care of by someone else. That ‘someone else’ might be a technical director, a supply chain lead or an external auditor, but the result is the same. Strategic decisions are made without fully appreciating the implications for product integrity. “That’s what makes it different to other existential risks,” said Kirby. “Food safety depends on your lowest-paid employees, the people doing sanitation, testing and cleaning. And they’re rarely the ones being heard by the board.” The disconnect is often reinforced by how organisations manage risk. As Murphy explained, getting food safety onto the board’s agenda is not just about prioritisation, it is about structure. “Boards are busy, time is short, and if food safety isn’t built into the enterprise risk management process, it gets filtered out. If it doesn’t appear in the enterprise risk register, it won’t go to the audit and risk committee. And if it doesn’t go there, it won’t reach the board.”

Even when food safety does reach senior decision-makers, the way it is presented can be a barrier in itself. Scientific language and technical frameworks may not resonate with executives who are not familiar with the context. “We’re not always the best communicators,” said Kirby. “And if the message isn’t clear, it gets ignored.”

Murphy agreed. “You only get a few minutes. If you’ve got ten minutes on the board agenda, you have to cut through. That means using the language of impact, top line, bottom line, brand, people. And it means talking in terms of business growth and consumer confidence, not just compliance.”

Coffin reinforced the point. “Too often we explain food safety risk in isolation, using technical terms or reference points that don’t connect to strategic outcomes,” she said. “We need to reframe the conversation. If there’s a food safety failure, what does that mean financially, operationally or reputationally? Talk about cost of loss, brand damage and business continuity. That’s the kind of language that resonates at senior levels.”

The panel also explored cultural dynamics. In some organisations, food safety teams are all too often perceived as overly cautious or restrictive, which can create distance between them and other functions.





## “We need to shift the narrative from ‘no’ to ‘how’,” said Coffin. “It’s not about blocking innovation; it’s about enabling it safely, within the risk appetite of the business.”

To bridge these gaps, food safety leaders need to engage differently. Murphy highlighted the value of identifying allies across the organisation, from legal and brand to procurement and operations. Board members with personal connections to the issue, such as family allergies or experience with past incidents, can also be valuable advocates. Awareness events, such as World Food Safety Day, can serve as moments to engage leadership with meaningful data, clear visuals and concise messaging.

Coffin and Kirby also emphasised the importance of leading indicators that offer sharper insights into performance; metrics like rework rates, near misses, time to close non-conformances or staff turnover can reveal emerging risk more effectively than audit scores or complaint counts. “If your quality manager turnover is high, or your sanitation team is consistently short-staffed, that tells you something,” said Kirby. “These are the people closest to the risk.”

Ultimately, the biggest barrier may be how food safety is perceived. If it is viewed only as a compliance requirement, it will always struggle to compete with growth-focused priorities. But when it is seen as a driver of brand trust, business resilience and long-term value, it becomes part of the business success story. “It’s not just about liability,” said Murphy. “It’s about reputation and trust. And if a director doesn’t understand that, they’re missing the point.”

# TOWARDS BETTER GOVERNANCE

**The conversation around food safety is changing, but lasting improvement will only come through stronger governance. That means more than setting policies or reviewing dashboards. It requires active ownership, meaningful oversight and a shared understanding of food safety as a strategic business issue, not just a technical one.**

For Cliona Murphy, the shift begins with clear board-level responsibility. “There needs to be someone at board level with defined accountability for food safety,” she said. “That doesn’t mean they have to be an expert, but they do need to be accountable for asking the right questions and making sure the information is there.” In mature organisations, this role is often taken by a member of the audit and risk committee, or by someone with operational experience who understands the supply chain and manufacturing context.

One effective governance model, discussed during the panel, is the three lines of defence framework. In this model, site-level functions act as the first line, technical leadership as the second, and independent assurance, such as internal audit, as the third. The board oversees all three. This structure creates clarity around roles and ensures that the board is not solely reliant on frontline reporting. “It helps prevent overconfidence,” said Murphy. “You’re not just hearing from the same person every time. You’re getting triangulated information.”

Coffin supported this call for deeper engagement. In her experience, mature businesses ask better questions and expect clearer answers. “They’re not just asking if you passed an audit, they’re asking what the findings actually mean and how do they translate into business risk impact” she said.

**“If they’re asking smart questions, the whole organisation steps up. But if they’re silent, that silence travels too”**

*– Roy Kirby*

Embedding food safety into broader governance frameworks also means making it visible in corporate reporting. Murphy pointed to sustainability and ESG disclosures as an opportunity. “If you say you value consumer trust and product integrity, but don’t mention food safety anywhere in your reporting, that’s a disconnect,” she said. “It needs to be part of the conversation.”

The same applies to risk registers. If food safety is absent from the enterprise risk management process, or listed only under operational risks, it is unlikely to receive the scrutiny or resources it needs. In contrast, businesses that elevate food safety into their top risk priorities tend to have clearer action plans, stronger controls and more consistent leadership attention.

In fact, in many jurisdictions, regulatory authorities now expect food safety to be reviewed at board level as part of broader governance obligations. As Roy Kirby noted during the discussion, “in order to discharge that legal responsibility [to understand and mitigate company risks], boards must be having a discussion about food safety.” Cliona Murphy reinforced the point, citing that agencies like the FDA in the United States “will take a very dim view” if food safety is not reviewed annually by the board, especially in the event of a recall. In some cases, it is not just good governance – it is a compliance requirement.

Ultimately, raising the bar on food safety governance is not about bureaucracy. It is about creating a culture of clarity, curiosity and accountability. As Kirby noted, when senior leaders ask questions and show genuine interest, it sends a signal that food safety matters.

# WHAT HAPPENS NEXT DEPENDS ON WHO'S PAYING ATTENTION

Throughout this discussion, one message came through clearly: food safety is no longer just a technical issue. It is a boardroom issue, a brand issue and a business continuity issue.

The risks are evolving, the consequences are accelerating and the expectations from consumers, regulators and stakeholders are rising. If food safety is not visible at the top table, then leadership is operating with an incomplete view of business risk.

The good news is that the tools to address this gap already exist. Businesses do not need to reinvent governance models or create new functions. They need to apply the same level of scrutiny, curiosity and accountability to food safety that they already apply to financial, operational and reputational risk. That means embedding food safety into enterprise risk management, discussing it at board level, measuring performance with both leading and lagging indicators and ensuring accountability at the highest levels of leadership.

It also means shifting the tone of the conversation.

As Kimberly Coffin said, this is not about food safety professionals shouting louder, it is about helping executives and directors listen differently, and that starts with framing food safety in the language of impact.

- What does a failure cost the business?
- How can food safety enable stronger business performance?
- What is the cost of inaction?

When food safety is seen as an enabler of resilience, innovation and trust, it stops being a background topic and becomes a strategic one.

Roy Kirby highlighted the mindset shift required. "Good food safety management is not about avoiding failure, it's about building capability," he said. "The best companies don't wait for something to go wrong. They build systems that work, even when things are changing around them."

Cliona Murphy echoed the call for cultural change. "Food safety isn't a standalone function. It reflects how the business thinks, how it acts and what it values," she said. "If it's not visible to the board, that's a cultural signal. And if leadership doesn't correct it, that silence becomes systemic."

This is where the opportunity lies. Like many others, food businesses are facing more complexity, more scrutiny and more sophisticated risk. Those that can demonstrate visible, credible, consistent governance of food safety will stand out, not just to regulators and customers, but to investors, employees and the public.

At LRQA, we work with organisations across the global food sector to help them understand their risk, benchmark their governance maturity and build resilience into their systems. Our role is not just to assess performance, but to challenge thinking, support cultural alignment and equip leaders to make informed decisions.

The future of food safety will not be shaped in the factory alone; it will be shaped in boardrooms, in executive teams and in the priorities those leaders choose to set.

# ABOUT LRQA

**LRQA is a leading global risk management partner.**

Through our connected risk management solutions, we help you navigate an evolving global landscape to keep you one step ahead.

From certification and cybersecurity, to safety, sustainability and supply chain resilience, we work with you to identify risks across your business. We then create smart, scalable solutions, tailored to help you prepare, prevent and protect against risk.

Through relentless client focus, backed by decades of sector-specific expertise, data-driven insight and on-the-ground specialists across assurance, certification, inspection, advisory and training, we support over 61,000 organisations in more than 150 countries.

**LRQA – Your risk management advantage.**

# GET IN TOUCH

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