

FEEDING THE FUTURE

HOW LESSONS FROM 2025 WILL SHAPE 2026

By Kimberly Coffin, Leon Mol and Campbell Mitchell



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INTRODUCTION

2025 brought the food industry a set of pressures that were difficult to ignore. Supply lines remained unsettled by geopolitical tension, regulatory signals were inconsistent, digital programmes advanced yet exposed practical limitations, and consumer expectations tightened. As we turn toward 2026, the question facing food businesses is straightforward: ‘what should we carry forward from this experience and how should we respond?’

LRQA’s recent webinar, featuring contributions from Kimberly Coffin of LRQA, Campbell Mitchell of Kraft Heinz and Leon Mol of Ahold Delhaize, offered a clear starting point. Across their different vantage points, one lesson stood out: systems and protocols remain essential, yet they do not deliver food safety on their own. People do, supported by the quality of the information available to them and by the organisation’s ability to interpret risk early and respond with

purpose. Where organisations had good visibility in 2025, disruption was manageable. Where visibility was lacking, minor issues became difficult to contain.

This whitepaper draws on that discussion alongside LRQA’s wider work across the food sector and supply chains in 2025. It considers how food businesses can strengthen their approach to risk at a time when challenges are broader and more interdependent. Our viewpoint is practical: food safety cannot be separated from decisions about sourcing, culture, capability, technology, sustainability or brand trust. Each influences the other, and gaps in any one area are quick to have an impact across the rest.

The intention here is to provide a structured examination of what 2025 revealed and how those lessons can inform 2026. The chapters that follow address digitalisation and AI,

the impact of geopolitical disruption, the need for stronger organisational capability and culture, and the growing effect of consumer scrutiny on risk management. These themes are familiar, yet their influence has sharpened. The food sector now requires a more connected understanding of risk, supported by clearer lines of accountability and a willingness to confront weak points with honesty.

For LRQA, the task is to help organisations bring coherence to this picture. Through connected risk management, spanning certification and cybersecurity, to safety, sustainability and supply chain, we support businesses in linking data, insight and operational practice.



Kimberly Coffin
Technical Director of
Supply Chain Assurance 



Campbell Mitchell
Head of Food Safety 



Leon Mol
Director Global Product Safety 



A SHARED LESSON

When the panellists were asked to compress 2025 into one lesson that truly matters for 2026, they approached the question from different organisational perspectives yet landed on the same principle.

Coffin framed it directly, explaining that “*systems on their own never deliver food safety; people and risk intelligence do.*” Procedures, certifications and documented controls provide structure, although they only translate into protection when the people responsible for them understand why they exist, what they are guarding against and how the external context is shifting.

Across LRQA’s work with clients, the same pattern appears. Many businesses present strong paper frameworks, yet difficulties emerge when something develops outside the scenarios those frameworks anticipated. The gap lies in the quality of risk intelligence: how information is captured, how it is interpreted and how quickly it reaches decision-makers. Where intelligence is connected and understood, issues are contained early. Where insight is scattered, small signals drift past, and the significance of incidents grow.

Mitchell commented that recent years have underlined the need for foresight. One disruption in a single region, he noted, can “*influence the whole supply chain*”, with logistical, political and safety implications arriving together. That reality elevates the importance of people who can read the pattern, not just the isolated event.

INTERCONNECTED DISRUPTION

The second lesson concerns the way disruption in 2025 travelled through supply chains. Political decisions, tariff changes, port congestion or regulatory shifts in one territory were felt by manufacturers and retailers in others. For many organisations, this year exposed the fragility created by tight sourcing, long chains and concentrated supply bases.

Mitchell described how “*just one impact in one part of the world*” created difficulties across networks. In practice, that meant sudden pressure on identification of alternative sources, delayed product reformulation, accelerated supplier onboarding and a heightened risk that controls were weakened in the rush to protect continuity. Long, lean supply chains may be efficient in calm conditions; they become brittle when routes close or expectations diverge.

Regulatory change added further complexity. Mol reflected on how geopolitical shifts had “*interrupted*” what once felt like a continuous process of rulemaking:



Regulation can move with political winds, yet customers expect consistency.

For retailers managing large assortments across multiple geographies, every erosion of predictability multiplies the challenge of protecting trust in product safety.”

The experience of 2025 therefore points to a clearer requirement for 2026: greater resilience in sourcing, more realistic contingency planning and stronger visibility of upstream conditions.

FOOD SAFETY IS A STRATEGIC RISK

A third lesson sits at organisational level. The panel discussion illustrated a growing acceptance that food safety belongs at the centre of enterprise risk, rather than being confined to technical and quality functions.

Mitchell observed that food safety is increasingly part of “*the overall business plan*”, with governance, risk and compliance teams, internal auditors, financial teams and insurers becoming more engaged. This shift matters. When food safety sits only in a specialist corner, supply and commercial decisions can advance without a full view of their implications. When it is recognised as a strategic risk, questions change: how much risk is tolerable? Where does it sit? And which trade-offs are acceptable?

From LRQA’s vantage point, this movement toward enterprise framing is necessary. Food safety interacts with brand value, regulatory exposure, investor expectations and even access to markets. Treating it simply as a compliance requirement blunts its strategic weight.

ACTING ON THE LESSONS IN 2026

When considering how to embed these lessons into 2026 planning, two themes were prominent: better use of data and stronger foresight.

Mitchell stressed the need to “*get the data together in a cohesive way*” and to define risk appetite more clearly. Without a shared view of what level of risk is acceptable, organisations struggle to respond consistently when conditions change. Insight exists, but decisions stall or diverge because thresholds are unclear.

Mol spoke about the need to rely more on internal data and infrastructure. His view was that businesses “*cannot rely anymore on everything around us*”, and that they must make their own systems scalable enough to cope with the volume and variety of products and suppliers. Manual oversight becomes unrealistic in this context; analytical tools and structured frameworks become essential, although they still require human interpretation and challenge.

For LRQA, these points translate into three practical priorities for 2026:



1. IMPROVE VISIBILITY ACROSS THE SUPPLY CHAIN

Map where risk signals originate and how they move through the organisation. Certification outcomes, supplier performance, incident learnings, cyber findings and sustainability data should be brought together in a connected view rather than held in isolated reports.



2. CLARIFY OWNERSHIP AND ESCALATION ROUTES

Agree who is accountable for particular risk areas and how issues progress from local teams to senior decision-makers. Food safety, procurement, operations, IT, sustainability and brand functions need aligned expectations on when to act, how to share information and what support is available.



3. EMBED FOOD SAFETY IN ENTERPRISE RISK AND STRATEGY

Ensure that food safety considerations appear in risk registers, business plans and strategic initiatives. This influences how new products are developed, how sourcing decisions are made and how resilience investments are prioritised.

AI TIPPING POINT



During the webinar, we invited the audience to respond to a series of live polls. The first poll focused on digitalisation and AI. Its results give a useful snapshot of current sentiment and, when compared with LRQA's earlier research, show how thinking has shifted over the past year.

Digital tools continue to promise clearer visibility, stronger traceability and a more predictive approach to food safety. Yet the journey from experimentation to meaningful adoption remains uneven across the food sector. This year's poll reflects that reality, revealing an industry that values the potential of digitalisation while still navigating the practicalities of implementation.

The poll asked respondents to consider whether digital tools and AI are already helping improve food safety transparency and predictive risk management. The responses formed a broad spectrum, although one trend stood out.

The largest group selected neutral (exploring AI and digital tools, although with limited or inconsistent results); signalling active engagement, yet also a degree of hesitation as organisations work to understand what digitalisation and AI genuinely offers and how much effort is required to make it function effectively. A smaller proportion agreed that they are seeing measurable benefits, while only a minority placed themselves at the pioneering end of adoption. A notable segment disagreed, explaining that manual systems still define their operations.

For Coffin, the central clustering around neutrality suggested that organisations are becoming more realistic about the demands of digitalisation:

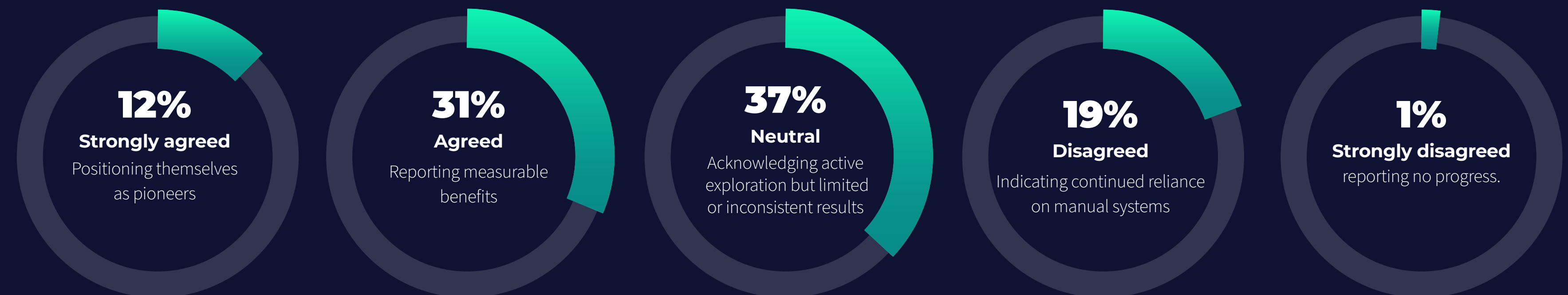


Digitalisation is no longer about testing ideas in pockets of the business; it requires a level of discipline around data, process and governance that many organisations are only now beginning to confront. Until those foundations are secure, AI will always feel out of reach."

Mol echoed this, adding that early trials have shown many businesses "how much they still do not know," which may help explain the tempered tone in the responses.



Digital tools and AI are already helping us improve food safety transparency and predictive risk management."



ARE WE REACHING A TIPPING POINT FOR AI?

When viewed alongside [LRQA's earlier digitalisation and AI whitepaper](#), the shift in sentiment becomes clearer. Last year, more than 90% of respondents described digitalisation as an organisational priority, with over 50% placing it in the high to top tier. That optimism has softened into a more measured stance.

The strong neutral showing in the current poll reflects a sector that still values digitalisation, yet recognises the structural work required: cleaner data, stronger governance, better-connected systems and clearer internal capability. These were themes raised repeatedly in last year's research and appear even more relevant now.

The panel discussed whether 2026 represents a tipping point for AI, or whether foundational work remains the priority. Coffin offered a *"considered and cautious yes,"* pointing to the number of organisations now discussing data readiness, integration and targeted use cases rather than hypothetical potential.

Agreeing with Coffin, Mitchell added that *"the promise of digitalisation is real, although the industry is learning that value only appears once data speaks the same language across the organisation. If systems remain fragmented, AI becomes another tool we cannot use well."*

Mol only echoed what had been discussed, and recognised AI's potential for large supply chains, although he also acknowledged hesitation where AI may influence compliance decisions without strong governance in place:



AI will help us manage complexity at a scale no manual system can match, yet confidence depends entirely on the integrity of the information underneath it. Without that, we risk making faster decisions, but not better ones."



AI GOVERNANCE

Reading between the lines of both the poll and the panel discussion, there appears to be a broader concern about introducing AI into a business environment that is already highly regulated and operationally sensitive. Without clear governance, AI can feel unstable, particularly when its outputs influence product safety or compliance decisions.

This is where ISO 42001, the international standard for AI management, begins to offer reassurance. Although still optional, an increasing number of businesses are adopting it early, using the framework to give structure to their AI ambitions. It provides clarity on decision-making, transparency, responsible data use and oversight, and it positions organisations ahead of the regulatory expectations that are likely to emerge in the near future. Early adopters are using it to ensure their AI programmes enhance risk management rather than introduce new vulnerabilities.

Discover LRQA's ISO 42001 early adopter pack.

WHAT AI CAN REALISTICALLY DELIVER TODAY

AI already supports useful functions when built on strong data foundations. These include automated document review, identification of patterns in environmental monitoring data, faster analysis of raw material risks and improved traceability through image and sensor inputs.

Even so, these applications still rely on human judgement. Mitchell referenced a practical demonstration in which AI was asked to evaluate risk in a specific commodity category. The tool generated a plausible shortlist, although it lacked the breadth seen in more established expert databases, highlighting the need for combined human and machine insight.

A REALISTIC OUTLOOK FOR 2026

Taken together, the poll results and the panel's reflections point toward a cautious but steady trajectory. Digitalisation continues to advance, although its progress now depends heavily on internal capability, clear governance and thoughtful investment. AI is gaining attention, yet most organisations are still building the basic digital foundation that will allow more predictive tools to function with confidence.

For 2026, the opportunity lies in strengthening the systems and data that support digital adoption, while preparing for the more formal governance of AI that is likely to emerge.



RISK IDENTIFICATION AND RESILIENCE

People, culture and capability emerged as one of the most candid parts of the discussion between Kimberly Coffin, Campbell Mitchell and Leon Mol. Their reflections aligned closely with feedback gathered through the second poll, which revealed how unevenly culture and capability are embedded across organisations.

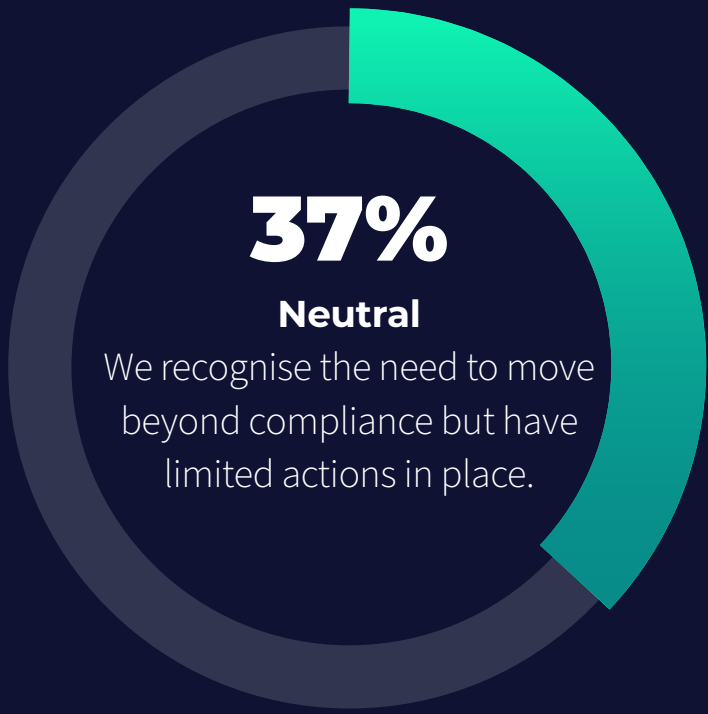
The second poll explored how embedded food safety risk intelligence and culture are within wider business strategy.

The results showed a sector moving, yet not uniformly, towards a more integrated view of risk. A proportion of respondents see food safety as part of enterprise planning, while many selected neutral (recognising the need to go further, although with limited action so far). A smaller but important group signalled that food safety remains primarily compliance driven.

These results mirror [LRQA’s 2025 benchmark findings](#), where internal capability building scored lowest among the nine principles. Many organisations articulate culture confidently, although fewer have achieved the integration and behavioural consistency that culture requires.



Our organisation is moving beyond compliance to embedded food safety risk intelligence and culture into our wider business strategy.”



WHAT CULTURE MEANS INSIDE A FOOD BUSINESS

A recurring message from the panel was that culture is defined less by documentation and more by how people interpret risk. Coffin described culture as something that *“becomes real only when teams understand why controls matter and how their actions influence safety outcomes”*. She noted that many organisations still rely heavily on procedures, yet do not cultivate the curiosity or judgement needed to identify risk when it does not present itself neatly.



Culture is not a statement on the wall. It is the willingness of people at every level to understand risk, to ask questions and to act early.”

Mitchell stressed that capability develops through repeated engagement with real scenarios. He remarked that teams gain confidence when they understand past incidents, near misses and the chain of decisions that allowed issues to develop. In his view, reflective practice strengthens culture far more effectively than periodic training.

Mol added that culture becomes fragile when people *“only see their part of the process”* and do not appreciate how their decisions influence other functions.

These perspectives align directly with the large neutral group in the poll: organisations that recognise the need for stronger culture but have not yet established the mechanisms that turn intention into action.

LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATION

The panel also emphasised the role of leadership in shaping culture. Culture does not rise from the operational level; it is modelled, reinforced and legitimised by senior decision makers. We explore this in more depth in a recent [LRQA whitepaper on food safety](#) at board level, drawing on perspectives from Kimberly Coffin, Cliona Murphy, Non-Executive Director at Bord Bia, and Roy Kirby, Partner at FoodsafERM and former Co-Chair of the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI).

Mol highlighted the challenge of speaking to boards in terms that resonate beyond technical compliance. He observed that technical language, however accurate, *“does not always convey the scale of business impact,”* which leads to underestimation of food safety risk.



If the message is not framed in the language of business impact, it is rarely heard. Boards need to understand risk in the same terms they use to run the organisation.”

Mitchell echoed this, pointing out that leaders respond when they can *“see themselves in the scenario,”* which is why strong culture programmes increasingly rely on real examples, simulations and transparent discussion of issues.



CAPABILITY IS A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Perhaps the most striking insight was the shared recognition that capability cannot sit solely with food safety teams. Decisions that shape risk are often made long before technical teams become involved.

Coffin highlighted the persistent disconnect between sourcing and food safety functions. She explained that many gaps in resilience and culture stem from decisions made without adequate risk intelligence, after which technical teams are left to contain issues rather than influence their prevention. Mitchell reinforced this point:



Capability grows when people understand that food safety is their responsibility too. When procurement, operations, sustainability and commercial teams share the same view of risk, decisions become stronger and resilience improves.”

Mol neatly captured this in one statement: *“Organisations sometimes look in the wrong place for the problem, because insight has not travelled across functions in time to influence action.”*

The neutral poll responses reflect this exact barrier. Many organisations understand what integration should look like, yet have not established the cross functional routines that turn food safety into shared ownership.

WHERE CAPABILITY NEEDS TO GROW IN 2026

The poll results and panel perspectives bring to attention several emerging priorities for strengthening culture and capability in 2026:

Earlier involvement of food safety expertise

Culture matures when technical insight shapes decisions, not when it audits them.



Clearer translation of risk

Teams must articulate safety issues in terms that resonate with leadership and commercial functions.



Reflective learning and scenario work

Capability grows through repeated exposure to real events, not isolated training modules.



Cross-functional alignment

Culture develops when everyone understands their role in managing risk, not only technical teams.



CONSUMER SCRUTINY AND “CANCEL CULTURE”



Consumer scrutiny has intensified in recent years, and the panel recognised how quickly reputational risk now develops. This theme was explored through the third poll, which asked participants to reflect on their organisation’s readiness to respond to reputational risks driven by consumer scrutiny or cancel culture.



Our organisation is prepared to respond effectively to reputational risks driven by consumer scrutiny or ‘cancel culture’.”



The poll results show encouraging momentum. Those who strongly agreed described having proactive monitoring, defined crisis structures and transparent communication strategies. Those who agreed indicated that core elements are in place, albeit with recognised gaps. Taken together, this group represents the largest share of respondents, signalling that many organisations now treat crisis communication and reputational risk prevention as essential disciplines in an era of always-on media.

The central neutral group, which reflected 25% of all respondents, tells a more nuanced story. These organisations understand the risk and recognise that consumer scrutiny can escalate rapidly, although their processes, governance and response mechanisms remain in development. For some, there is uncertainty about who should lead, how decisions should be made and what level of transparency is expected.

Respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed highlighted a more reactive culture. In these environments, the organisation often becomes visible in the discussion only after the reputational damage is already established.

Coffin attributed this to a common structural issue:



Many businesses still treat reputational risk as a communications problem rather than an operational one. By the time a message is crafted, the real issue is already public.”

For LRQA, the poll results reflect a wider shift. Reputational risk is increasingly tied to failures in responsible sourcing, cyber security, worker welfare, animal welfare and environmental performance.

Cancel culture, in this context, is not a social phenomenon detached from business; it is the visible outcome of underlying operational risk.

CONSUMER SCRUTINY AND “CANCEL CULTURE”

THE SPEED OF REPUTATIONAL ESCALATION

The panel described cancel culture as a form of “*accelerated consequence*”. A single misstep, whether connected to supply chain conditions, product safety incidents or data breaches, can amplify rapidly across digital channels. Consumers expect immediate response and transparency, regardless of whether the organisation has full knowledge of the issue.

 **75%** of consumers

say they would stop purchasing from a brand after a cyber incident, and 66% would not trust that company with their data following a breach Vercara, Consumer Trust & Risk, 2023.

Mol noted that modern scrutiny “*moves faster than most internal escalation routes,*” which means organisations are often left addressing public concern before they have complete information. This dynamic puts pressure on teams that may not be structured for rapid coordination.

Mitchell added a broader reflection on expectation: when consumers see a brand fail on issues of safety, ethics or welfare, they no longer distinguish between categories of harm. The reaction is shaped by trust. “*People respond to what the brand represents, not the technical detail,*” he remarked, highlighting how reputational risk extends beyond the immediate incident.



Reputational risk is not about the volume of noise online. It is about whether people believe the brand understands the issue, takes responsibility and acts with sincerity. If that is missing, the reaction grows quickly.”



THE OPERATIONAL ROOTS OF CANCEL CULTURE

A key message from the panel was that cancel culture rarely emerges from isolated incidents; it is usually triggered by failures that connect back to the fundamentals of responsible sourcing and risk management.

Mitchell noted that when consumers lose trust, it is often because the incident exposes “a deeper issue the brand should have seen coming.” Examples include poor visibility of labour conditions, weak oversight of animal welfare practices, cyber incidents exposing consumer data or lapses in environmental claims. In each case, the scrutiny is not only about the event itself but about what the event reveals.



Cancel culture feels sudden, but the risks that drive it are rarely new. When organisations build clear governance and challenge their own blind spots, the space for surprise becomes smaller.”

Mol reinforced this by saying organisations often “focus on the headline rather than the pattern,” which leads to repeated exposure instead of systemic prevention. These patterns are precisely where integrated risk intelligence becomes essential.



STRENGTHENING READINESS FOR 2026

Drawing together the poll insights and the panel’s reflections, several priorities emerge for organisations strengthening their preparedness for reputational risk in 2026:

Operational transparency



Ensuring that supply chain information, welfare standards, ESG claims and cyber hygiene can stand up to scrutiny.

Clear crisis governance



Defining who leads, who decides and how quickly action must be taken.

Authentic communication



Aligning actions and statements so the organisation avoids perceived defensiveness or minimisation.

Scenario practice



Using real case studies to build confidence and reduce decision-making hesitation.

Integrated risk intelligence



Connecting food safety with ESG, cyber, regulatory and sourcing functions to reveal early patterns of vulnerability.

For LRQA, reputational resilience is a direct outcome of disciplined risk management. Organisations that understand where their vulnerabilities sit, invest in cultural capability and respond with clarity and integrity will be best positioned to navigate the scrutiny that now defines consumer behaviour.

CONCLUSION – SHAPING 2026 WITH INTENT

The discussions between Kimberly Coffin, Campbell Mitchell and Leon Mol made one thing clear: the challenges facing food businesses in 2026 are not new, although the expectations surrounding them have intensified.

Organisations know where they need to move next and many have begun that journey, even if progress remains uneven. Poll responses showed genuine momentum in areas such as digital preparedness, organisational culture and crisis readiness. At the same time, the central clusters of neutral responders revealed that foundational work is still underway: better data, stronger engagement at senior levels and clearer governance around technology and communication.

Mitchell reflected on this during the session, observing that *“real progress happens when organisations are honest about their own weaknesses”*. His point captured a broader shift. Businesses are becoming more aware of the structural demands behind resilience and more willing to challenge the assumptions that shape current practice.

For LRQA, 2025 reaffirmed the need for connected thinking. Food safety risk cannot be separated from responsible sourcing, cyber security, environmental performance or regulatory compliance. These domains influence one another, and failures in one area rapidly become weaknesses in another. Culture sits at the centre of that ecosystem; determining how people interpret risk, how quickly signals move between functions and how effectively decisions are made under pressure.

Mol emphasised that resilience depends on visibility and accountability. Decisions made early in the supply network often define the risk profile long before an issue becomes public. This is where internal capability and cross functional alignment will play an increasingly critical role in the coming year.

Coffin added that the organisations best positioned for 2026 will be those that build discipline around data, governance and culture. She explained that when these

elements evolve together, organisations gain a form of operational clarity that makes anticipation possible rather than exceptional. Her insight encapsulates the direction of travel for the sector:



When capability, culture and intelligence move at the same pace, risk becomes something you see, not something that surprises you.”

Looking ahead, 2026 presents an opportunity for businesses to consolidate the lessons of 2025. Digital tools will continue to mature, although their value will depend on the strength of the data beneath them. Culture will require consistent reinforcement, grounded in shared responsibility rather than departmental ownership. Resilience will come from integrated risk intelligence, rather than isolated controls. And reputational protection will depend on authenticity, transparency and the readiness to act with urgency when scrutiny arises.

LRQA’s role is to support organisations in bringing coherence to these interconnected risks. Through independent assurance, supply chain insight, governance frameworks and capability development, we help organisations translate complexity into informed decision making, turning risk into opportunity. The organisations that thrive in 2026 will be those that act deliberately: strengthening foundations, aligning functions and building cultures that recognise both the scale of modern food system pressures and the opportunity to manage them with confidence.

Find out more about LRQA’s work in the food sector and discover additional insights.



ABOUT LRQA

LRQA is the 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.

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