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## Brexit breakfast <200 days to go...

*How can we get the best post-Brexit outcomes for UK food and farming systems?*

Report of Business Forum, 11<sup>th</sup> September 2018

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### The Brexit context – in brief

No sector in the UK is likely to be as seriously affected by Brexit as food and farming. With less than 200 days to go until 'Brexit day', there remains huge uncertainty, including over the size of farmer support post-Brexit, what future trade deals will look like and how the UK will ensure quality and quantity of labour. On the labour question, there are fears over shortages in many parts of food, farming and growing - including hospitality, horticulture, permanent veterinary positions (e.g. Bovine TB testers) and more.

Producers do not know what standards they will be working to, just over six months from now. There is a risk of paralysis by uncertainty, which could prove fatal for food and farming businesses that need to do long-term planning and investment. Brexit-related risks to the UK food system are sizeable and well documented (if not well understood at large). Nevertheless, Brexit could still bring opportunities to 'do' food and farming differently, for the long-term good of people, animals and planet.

*Addendum: the Agriculture Bill was published the day after this meeting, while the Trade Bill is expected imminently.*

### Critical issues

Much of the Parliamentary focus has been on replacing CAP subsidies with a 'public money for public goods' approach. How farmers will be incentivised and rewarded in future is vitally important. However, the Irish border and future trade deals are as big, if not bigger, issues. The Irish economy relies upon agriculture, so is arguably driving the Brexit debate.

Getting trade deals 'wrong' would have disastrous consequences for food and farming in the UK – not just for producers, but for citizens, animals and the environment too. There are few (if any) in food and farming who believe a 'no deal' scenario would be anything other than catastrophic for the sector. The scale of the challenge is huge and those involved in UK Brexit negotiations should not underestimate the complexity and scale of food supply chains.

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*"... on a busy day of the year, one of the supermarket chains brings in 50 articulated lorries - just with broccoli!"*

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A 'no deal' Brexit would have serious consequences for many parts of the food and farming sector, and beyond – from immediate concerns about food security and availability of labour to loss of regulatory influence at EU level. To pick out just one specific example, UK organic food businesses may be prevented from exporting to the EU for six months or more after Brexit, while the UK sets up its own organic certification scheme and proper tracking procedure.

### Getting the tone right...

Some individuals and organisations in food and farming are voicing concerns, but they are not always heard by government. If the concerns of those working in food and farming about what the future holds are not heard, the UK public might question why food and farming sectors were not more vocal, if there end up being disruptions to food supply post-Brexit

However, adopting a 'doomsday' tone is unlikely to be effective in driving the change that most want to see. It is important therefore for the sector to do more to paint a positive long-term post-Brexit vision, while at the same time, setting out practical steps that should be taken in the shorter term and challenging government on what mitigating measures it is taking. Painting a long-term vision is challenging while there remains a lack of clarity on the UK position.

Part of the post-Brexit vision should include food and farming promoting public health, with the associated benefits for individuals, society and the public purse.

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*"Food and farming is too important to be left sitting in the political ether"*

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### The need for a comprehensive, new food plan

It is important that there is a joined-up food strategy post-Brexit and not just a 'public money for public goods' approach to support good farming. As part of this, the NFU has published a food report<sup>1</sup> setting out what it sees as four critical areas:

1. 'The moral imperative' – how to produce enough food to feed the growing population (including beyond the UK's shores)
2. Standards and integrity – production standards should apply to all the food eaten in the UK, including imports
3. Working with nature – respecting nature while harnessing and protecting the benefits it brings
4. Health and nutrition – everyone in the UK should have access to a healthy, balanced diet

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nfonline.com/back-british-farming/campaign-news/nfus-food-report-delivered-to-britains-politicia/>

What underpins this is a desire to get the general public back in touch with food production and understanding how food is produced.

### What should be lobbied for?

The list of what to lobby for is long, but might include<sup>2</sup>:

- maintaining and strengthening UK food standards, whilst ensuring imports meet high standards
- a new system of farmer support – with guaranteed budgets - based on payment for public goods approach, including environmental stewardship, animal welfare and public health outcomes (including supporting transition to greater horticulture production in the UK)
- a Food Standards Agency with stronger set of teeth
- a new competition regulator and codes of conduct, to promote fairness in food supply chains
- greater support for farmer-to-farmer training and innovation
- food production to be valued, farmers and food producers to be paid and treated fairly, with greater price transparency
- mechanisms to ensure a diverse mix of farms in the countryside, new local and regional infrastructure, and support for new entrants
- a new body to enable joint negotiating between farmers and workers in way that allows workers to jointly negotiate pay and conditions
- measures to tackle issues relating to low income and access to good food

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*“We do not stop talking in 200 days, but we need to get over the line with everything still working.”*

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### Focusing effort and increasing the volume

Whilst there may be a long shopping list of ‘asks’, in order to be effective, it was argued that the sector should prioritise its asks, including proposed amendments to relevant Bills. It was suggested that the immediate focus of lobbying attention should be on avoiding a ‘WTO crash out’, before getting into more detailed asks. With so many different audiences to communicate with, but with limited resources, sectors should put aside internal differences.

Brexit discussions have already led to greater collaboration between NGOs, the farming sector and the rest of the food industry. It is critical to have a joined up, collaborative approach to ensure the collective voice is as powerful as it can be. If

representatives from the whole food value chain come together, it increases the likelihood of being effective.

Taking the example of access to labour and skills, this is a key challenge for the whole food and farming system. Hence the focus should not only be on seasonal workers in fruit picking, as important an issue as that is.

Looking beyond the sector may be helpful too. For example, arguing the case on labour concerns together with the NHS may be more powerful than ‘cherry picked’ stories about fruit picking. Focusing on societal issues that food and farming are part of, rather than just on food and farming, may be more effective.

It was suggested that, with a few notable exceptions, there has been a surprising absence of a voice from European operators and that it would be helpful for concerns to be aired publicly, both about maintaining a supply of UK food products into the EU and about the importance of the UK food market to EU countries. The UK food market is particularly important to countries like Ireland, the Netherlands and Denmark.

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*“[There is] a massive job [to be done] in ceasing the fragmentation and bringing a collective voice together”*

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### Understanding economic and ethical impacts

It is vital to promote better understanding of the consequences of decisions that will affect the long term future of food and farming.

Work is needed to demonstrate the economic case that getting food and farming ‘right’ will provide a big win for society over the coming decades. If trade deals negotiated post-Brexit are detrimental to UK food and farming, then businesses may need greater financial support from government in order to survive.

The UK Government is going to reach out to parts of the world it has never reached out to before that may have poor ability to do things to the level UK citizens expect. The ethical, environmental and social implications of reaching further afield to meet UK demand are huge. While in the long run there could be benefits to developing economies from exporting more to the UK, in the short term we risk triggering food shortages by competing with the locals who are not able to pay at the same rate.

The plan to trade further afield globally must also take into account the fact that some key ‘target countries’ are under pressure, with Australia for example

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<sup>2</sup> Note – this is not exhaustive and asks in this list are not necessarily supported by all food and farming businesses.

enduring its seventh year of drought (and having to prioritise its domestic demands).

It is important to get fairness ‘plumbed in’ to a positive agenda and vision for food and farming, and to engage people on both sides of the debate. Getting over the initial ‘cliff edge’ of Brexit is part of the story, but it needs to be a launch pad for long-term discussions, rather than the end of negotiations.

### Concluding comments

- The impact of a no-deal scenario would be catastrophic for many parts of the food and farming sectors.
- A rush to negotiate fair trade deals ‘at any cost’ must be avoided, as it risks undermining the (relatively) high standards of environmental stewardship, workers’ rights and animal welfare that UK citizens currently enjoy.
- There is a need:
  - For a loud and concerted voice – a unified rallying call
  - To manage the short-term and plan for the long-term
  - To promote better understanding of the consequences of a ‘no deal’ scenario in particular
  - To ‘plumb in’ ethical concerns to engage the public in ways that the intricacies of food and farming policy may not.

### Post script

While much discussion focuses on narrow definitions of food security, i.e. making sure there is still food on UK shelves post-Brexit, which will be hugely challenging, that on its own is not good enough. There needs to be *good* food on the *table* for all.

### What next?

#### Key questions to consider, and to act on, include:

- **What is still up for grabs in the Brexit food and farming debate?**
- **Who has influence on decision-making?**
- **How can those working in food and farming raise their profile and likely impacts of Brexit scenarios in both the political and public consciousness?**
- **What can be done to ensure food being imported as part of future trade agreements is produced to the same standards as the UK has?**
- **How can Parliamentarians be skilled up on how food supply chains operate, so that they better understand the importance and complexity of the sector and the consequences of decisions?**
- **For their long-term good, how can food and farming sectors better demonstrate the economic and ethical impacts of post-Brexit scenarios - the upsides of ‘getting it right’, as well as of ‘getting it wrong’?**

This is a report of the Business Forum meeting on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2018. We are grateful to our keynote speakers, **Minette Batters**, NFU President and **Vicki Hird**, Sustainable Farm Campaign Co-ordinator at Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming. The meeting was chaired by **Helen Browning**, farmer, Chief Executive of the Soil Association and member of the Food Ethics Council. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent those of the Food Ethics Council, nor its members. For more information on the Business Forum, contact Dan Crossley [dan@foodethicscouncil.org](mailto:dan@foodethicscouncil.org) +44 (0) 333 012 4147.