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**Northern Ireland food supply at risk of disruption but neglected in Brexit negotiations, says new report**

Northern Ireland’s future food supply could be at risk of serious disruption because the UK Government is neglecting the issue in Brexit negotiations, according to a new report.

Experts from the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) and City, University of London warn there has been no planning for how food trade will fit into any changes to the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Published by the Food Research Collaboration and the CIEH, the report shows why a “frictionless” border is vital to the high-volume, economically and nutritionally important food trade into, out of and through Northern Ireland.

The border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is currently, in effect, invisible. Anyfuture deal which requiresborder checks and infrastructure raises serious food safety, standards, crime and fraud risks, according to the report. New arrangements could increase food prices, reduce access to healthy food, cause transport delays and harm agri-food businesses.

**Only four possible options**

The report sets out the only four ways in which either the current arrangements can be guaranteed or any future border can be truly “frictionless”:

1. Stay in the Customs Union and the Single Market;
2. Reach a mutually agreed future customs arrangement between UK and EU that achieves the same thing;
3. The whole of the UK commits to future regulatory alignment; or
4. A set of unique arrangements is developed for Northern Ireland.

The authors urge the UK Government to publish plans for what “food Brexit” will look like for Northern Ireland, and call for the UK, the EU and the Republic of Ireland to come together to overcome the issues.

“Prime Minister Theresa May’s commitment to a ‘frictionless border’ cannot be fudged over food,” said report co-author Professor Tim Lang, of the Centre for Food Policy at City, University of London.

“The Northern Ireland food system urgently needs some clear decisions to be taken by all sides in respect of ‘food Brexit’. This important issue is not, at present, receiving the attention that it deserves, and this failure of food governance should not be allowed to continue.”

**Food ‘central to the economy of Northern Ireland’**

The briefing paper, called *Food, Brexit and Northern Ireland: critical issues****,*** reviews the available data on food trade and the flow of food in and out of Northern Ireland, and considers how consumers and businesses will be affected by Brexit.

The authors argue that food is central to the economy of Northern Ireland, and the continuing supply of safe, high-quality, healthy food is currently dependent on the absence of border controls between Northern Ireland, EU member state the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain and the rest of the EU.

The report cites figures that show hundreds of thousands of tonnes of food criss-cross these borders annually, free from inspection because of shared, underpinning EU single market regulation.

Northern Ireland exports £1.15 billion worth of food to the EU, about 70 per cent of which goes to or through the Republic of Ireland.

Great Britain is the biggest single market for the Northern Ireland food and drink processing sector, and Northern Ireland also depends on substantial food imports, especially of fruit and vegetables. The Northern Ireland agri-food sector employs 100,000 people, with the food and drink sector the country’s most important manufacturing industry.

**Border technology suggestions ‘vague and unrealistic’**

The report dismisses as “vague and unrealistic” the idea that technology could be used to check food (and other goods) crossing between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Gary McFarlane, co-author and the CIEH’s Director in Northern Ireland, said: “Technological solutions may or may not be possible in the future, but they do not exist at present. Furthermore, technological solutions cannot replace the need for food inspection by qualified and competent food professionals.

“Proper food inspection requires someone to look inside lorries and make judgements about critical food safety and standards.”

The authors say there is little contingency planning being done for Brexit’s impact on food in Northern Ireland and the preparation that is being done is being undertaken by public health officials, which they say is unacceptable.

Tony Lewis, co-author and Head of Policy at CIEH, said: “Port health officers, customs officers and other trade and health-related professionals cannot resolve political difficulties, nor should responsibility for resolving practicalities be placed at their door.

“The responsibilities of such professionals are to the common good, including the public’s safety and health.”

**The report makes more than 30 recommendations. Key proposals are that:**

1. There should be an explicit commitment to maintain uninterrupted food flows to the people of Northern Ireland.
2. Political differences should be put aside to allow the relevant authorities to concentrate on practicalities.
3. Detailed plans for how food inspections might be managed post-Brexit should be produced. A joint Northern Ireland and EFRA Select Committee should conduct an inquiry into the state of Government investment in this sphere. This should seek to clarify (a) whether trials are underway or contracts have been signed, and (b) the feasibility, cost and functions of technical equipment and scientific staff.
4. The European Commission should seek clarification from the UK Government on the general food status of Northern Ireland, particularly its reliance on food imports and exports.
5. The three dominant food retail companies in Norther Ireland (Tesco, Asda and Sainsbury’s), have particular responsibilities to prevent Northern Ireland’s food system being cut off from both the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain. Their forward planning should be reviewed by open processes such as a Select Committee.
6. The UK Government’s civil contingencies (COBRA) system should be preparing for eventualities arising from “food Brexit", including the impacts for Northern Ireland.

**ENDS**

**Notes to editors**

The briefing paper, *Food, Brexit and Northern Ireland: critical issues*, is available for media to read at: http://foodresearch.org.uk/publications/food-brexit-northern-ireland/

It will be published on the Food Research Collaboration website at 00:01 (BST) on Tuesday, 10th April 2018.

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**The Food Research Collaboration** is a UK initiative that brings together academics and civil society organisations to improve the production, sharing and use of the evidence-based knowledge needed to influence and improve UK food policy. It has 600 members and is based at the Centre for Food Policy at City, University of London. This is the third of its Food Brexit Briefings.

The **Chartered Institute of Environmental Health** was founded in the 19th century to deliver Victorian public health reforms. It aims to improve public health and wellbeing by supporting its members across many sectors. It provides information, evidence and policy advice to local and national government, regulators, members, stakeholders and the wider environmental health workforce.