

# Summary

A no-deal Brexit, for which the Government is now actively preparing, will have serious consequences for the United Kingdom's (UK) food and agriculture sectors. It risks raising prices and restricting supplies, especially of the fresh fruit and vegetables we are urged to eat more of: both these developments carry a threat to public health, especially for consumers on low incomes. It risks tipping farmers and food manufacturers into bankruptcy (at worst) or subjecting them to considerable additional cost and anxiety – burdens that will disproportionately affect the small, medium and micro businesses that predominate in the food sector. It will also stretch to breaking point the public authorities responsible for maintaining food safety and standards.

Nowhere will these effects be more sharply felt than in Northern Ireland (NI), where food and agriculture comprise an important element in the economy, diets are already poorer than in other parts of the UK, and the high degree of cross-border integration of food supply chains means that food flows between NI, the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and Great Britain (GB) are critical both to both public health and to livelihoods.

It seems clear that, in the absence of any agreement on trade (i.e., in a no-deal exit), ROI would be legally obliged, as a member of the European Union (EU) responsible for a border with a 'third country' (which is what the UK will become), to apply border controls to food entering Ireland from the UK. These could involve tariffs as well as an array of physical and documentary checks. To be able to trade across the border, UK exporters would have to meet the requirements for these procedures, even if the checks themselves took place on the European (i.e. Irish) side.

On the island of Ireland, foodstuffs cross the border very often, sometimes making multiple crossings at different stages of production and processing. In 2018, of all goods traded by NI across the border, food and live animals formed the largest category both exported to ROI (32% of the total) and imported from ROI (40%). Similarly, the UK is ROI's largest single trading partner for agri-foods and processed foods, with 99% of mushrooms, 50% of red meat and 22% of dairy produce crossing the border. One business (Diageo) which manufactures Bailey's Irish Cream on both sides of the border, dispatches trucks on 18,000 cross-border trips every year.

The impact of border interventions in this trade would be considerable. Taking the example of foods comprising or containing constituents of animal origin, every consignment crossing from Northern Ireland to the Republic would in future need to be accompanied by an Export Health Certificate, filled in by the exporter and countersigned by either an Environmental Health Officer or a vet, who would have had to physically inspect the goods to verify compliance. To use a practical example to illustrate, for a sandwich maker producing five different types of sandwich with animal-origin ingredients (such as eggs, meat or fish), and shipping them across the border to 20 different outlets on a daily bases, this would mean 100 certificates a day. Given the numbers of businesses involved, the frequency and volume of documentation required, and the current resources available to carry out the work, servicing the anticipated demand is not feasible, and certainly not by 31 October. There are insufficient qualified professionals, and insufficient time and resources to recruit and train new ones.

In these circumstances, food consumers in NI will experience disruption, public authorities will be severely tested and food enterprises will face potentially insurmountable challenges.