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Citation: Lang, T. (2019). No-deal food planning in UK Brexit. *The Lancet*, 394(10201), pp. 814-815. doi: 10.1016/s0140-6736(19)31769-6

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Link to published version: [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(19\)31769-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(19)31769-6)

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No-deal food planning in UK Brexit

Tim Lang

Published in *The Lancet*, August 5 2019, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(19\)31769-6](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(19)31769-6)

Even for a country with a long history of arguments about food supply,¹ the UK's present situation is remarkable. A country that received 28% of its food in 2018 directly from the European Union (EU),² plus 11% more through EU trade deals,³ is now planning, under the leadership of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, to leave the EU ("Brexit") on Oct 31, 2019, with or without an agreement on how and what the terms are for trade, customs, and food security. The food implications for consumers and public health of a no-deal Brexit are seeping out of government but deserve full scrutiny.

Earlier this year, a leaked memorandum to cabinet ministers by Sir Mark Sedwill, the head of the civil service and National Security Adviser, indicated that food prices in the UK could rise by up to 10% and there would be disruptions to fresh produce supplies.⁴ The UK Government has used government and industry information to develop no-deal Brexit planning assumptions, including for food. These estimates have not been shared with the public. Yet it is the public whose dietary options are now expected to be disrupted. Disruption and shortages are predicted for fruit, vegetables, and short shelf-life food supplies that rely on imports.⁵

In the event of a no-deal Brexit on Oct 31, the working assumption is that France will impose EU rules about tariffs (border taxes) and has to, by law, treat the UK as a "third country" without any trade agreement with the EU. This will be enforced at key ports through which food arrives in the UK, notably Calais. In this scenario, the UK would have to trade on World Trade Organization terms.³ Road hauliers are being urged to register and complete border paperwork

to minimise delays at border crossings, but the UK Government's planning assumption is now that at least half the trucks might be unable to have smooth border transit. If so, the flow of trucks through the main UK ports, notably Dover, could drop by a third or more within 1 day of a no-deal Brexit. If this level of disruption continued for 2–3 months, the effects would be unprecedented in peacetime.

Most UK fresh food imports come from within the EU—19% of fruit and vegetables from Spain alone—and even sources outside the EU such as Morocco or Egypt are via EU trade deals. Food prices are likely to rise by more than Sedwill's estimate of 10%. Disruption to just-in-time logistics would be compounded by a fall in the value of sterling.⁶ No public advice has been given yet on how this might restrict current dietary health advice. The UK already underconsumes fruit and vegetables.⁷ The concern is that Brexit disruptions will worsen the gap between advice and reality, particularly for people on low incomes.

Organisations concerned about such vulnerabilities have been meeting with civil servants for some time, urging the creation of special hardship funds, and the issue has been raised in Parliament,⁸⁻¹⁰ but so far the public is largely in the dark. A £138 million "Prepare for Brexit" campaign including £100 million for a public information campaign, to be run by Engine, an advertising company, is about to begin, designed to reassure the nation.^{11 122} Will this campaign share the government's actual prognoses for what will happen within a day of a no-deal Brexit?

The UK Government is making internal decisions that will shape future health outcomes. A food chain emergency liaison group exists; other government committees are covered by the Official Secrets Act. The National Security Strategy exists¹³ but was premised on the actions of hostile external states or interests, not dynamics set in train by government. There are few forums for citizens' engagement in preparing for the impact of a no-deal Brexit on food prices and availability. The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 has provisions for local authorities to "inform

the public”.^{14 15} A government *Don't panic—prepare* booklet advises on issues such as snow, floods, and electricity cut-offs but has nothing tailored to food and Brexit.¹⁶ Its general advice to have 3 days of food for children is hardly appropriate for a no-deal Brexit. One hopes the new information campaign will do better than that. Local Resilience Forums, set up under the Civil Contingencies Act to help coordinate action in emergencies, are multiagency bodies but lack resources to plan how food systems will be affected in their areas.¹⁷

This situation is worrying.¹⁸ The UK state is reverting to its default positions of centralisation and planning secrecy that are reminiscent of what William Beveridge called, after World War 1, top-down “food control”.¹⁹ What is needed is engaged food democracy. To be fair, the UK Government’s rationale for food secrecy is fear of panic buying to which just-in-time delivery systems are vulnerable. Food industries agree; they know border and transport blockages will happen.

Low-income groups in the UK would disproportionately be affected by the impacts of a no-deal Brexit on food prices and availability. November is at the end of the UK agricultural growing season, so the availability of domestic fresh produce will decline. For companies, November is when their usual planning and storage arrangements are already under pressure in the pre-Christmas period. The main food bank organisers have informed the UK Government that their local groups do not have enough food, volunteer support, and storage capacity to deal with any uplift of need. They want a hardship fund to be established to ensure people have enough money for food.²⁰ At what point will the public be engaged and informed to help prepare for a no-deal Brexit? And is public health at the heart of planning? The posing of these questions is not new. But a troubling new food planning case study appears to be unfolding.

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I am a member of the London Food Board and declare no other competing interests.

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