

Written evidence submitted by Dr Christian Reynolds (TFA0023)

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1.1 I am a Reader at the Center for Food Policy, City, University of London. My main research areas are food loss and waste, and affordable, healthy, sustainable diets. I have worked on these issues in Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, the UK, US, and Europe. I have co-authored over 70 peer reviewed publications, as well as multiple reports and book chapters. I have led and supported rapid reviews of evidence for the Food Standards Agency and Defra on topics including citizen science; sustainability in the UK food system; and the environmental impact of public procurement. I will be providing information on specific questions asked by the committee below.

Agri-food strategy and oversight

How coherent and effective is the UK's trade strategy for food and agriculture? Is the Government taking account of the potential cumulative impact of new Free Trade Agreements (FTAs)?

2.1 There is a level of incoherence between UK domestic policy and UK trade strategy for food and agriculture. Parts of the existing Free Trade Agreements will possibly constrain ambition, reduce effectiveness, or even undermine the capacity of domestic policy.

2.2 I highlight as an example potential future conflicts between Free Trade Agreements with the domestic public procurement policy ambition. Specifically the changes discussed by the Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services consultations (Closed 4 Sep 2022, not yet published). This consultation included questions whether to a) widen the scope of GBSF mandatory organisations to cover the whole public sector and b) introducing an aspirational target that at least 50% of food spend must be on food produced locally or c) certified to higher environmental production standards. This level of scope change, local production inclusion, and environmental protection may have tensions with the public procurement sections of existing or future FTAs.

Are the UK Government's trade policy objectives consistent with those of the devolved Administrations, and has it taken those objectives adequately into account?

3.1 For the following section I will give evidence related to the Scottish and UK objectives and policy.

3.2 For context, in 2022, I ran 10 stakeholder interviews as part of a wider project that had the objective of highlighting potential gaps in the Scottish food systems data, and identifying and prioritising research requirements to resolve the data gaps (see O2T4-P2-21.01-DA/01). This was funded by Zero Waste Scotland.

3.3 The majority of interviewees (from across the UK and Scottish food system) highlighted the need for Scottish level trade data to inform their decision making processes. These include the need for additional intra-UK trade data (Scotland to England, Wales, NI etc.), with re-imports; as well as Scotland to global export/import. This was highlighted by the need for grain, oils, feed, and fertilizer imports and export data due to the Ukraine conflict, which was limited at the intra-UK level.

3.4 This lack of devolved to global and intra-UK trade data has impacts on policy formation, harmonisation, and assessment of impacts between UK Government and devolved Administrations. In short: food system operatives do not have enough data to make the best assessments, in a timely fashion. This may constrain the ability to harmonise policy objectives between UK Government and devolved Administrations.

3.5 Domestic food and agriculture are devolved policy areas under the devolution settlements. This has led to a level of incoherence between devolved Administrations domestic policy and UK trade strategy for food and agriculture. Again, UK level trade policy may constrain ambition, reduce effectiveness, or even undermine the capacity of food legislation such as The Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022, or Draft Food (Wales) Bill.

Standards and welfare

Is the Government's approach to trade aligned with its commitment to high standards for health (including plant and animal health), food safety, animal welfare and environmental protection, and the UK's right to regulate in these areas?

4.1 My research (Armstrong and Reynolds 2020) shows that country of origin and ethical information on food packaging are strong guides for many UK consumers.

4.2 In my work for the FSA, (Connors et al 2022, Reynolds et al 2022), we have found that high levels of food safety, animal welfare, and environmental protection are a) areas of concern and b) drivers for consumers to purchase UK food, and UK industry to manufacture food to high standards.

4.3 The UK's FTAs may not adequately safeguard these standards or prevent the import of products that do not meet them. This has been a discussion topic for multiple policy briefs of the Center for Food Policy's Food Research Collaboration – see <https://foodresearch.org.uk/>

4.4 I highlight that the current trade policy and content of specific FTAs may constrain ambition, reduce effectiveness, or even undermine the capacity of domestic policy to be effective at providing healthy, safe, and sustainable food for UK citizens.

Impact on food supply

What impact has the Government's approach to trade policy had on the security, quality and affordability of the UK's food supply?

5.1 Building on statement 3.3 and 3.4, I highlight that the data available to assess the impacts of UK trade policy is not adequate for timely analysis of security, quality and affordability of the UK's food supply. Current publically available data lags, which means that for many FTA and trade policies we are using pre-2020 datasets and assumptions to assess the impact(s).

5.2 For example, the 2019 UK Input-Output Analytical Tables were published on 27 March 2023 by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Input-Output Analyses and the impact multipliers they produce are key ways of understanding the impacts of trade on the UK Economy (and understanding how economic structure will change due to trade shocks).

5.3 Likewise, the latest version of the Family Food Survey by Defra is the 2020/21 Family Food Survey, was published on 21 February 2023; the latest publication of the Living Costs and Food Survey (LCF) UK is the 2020 LCF, which was published on 7 July 2021 by the Office for National Statistics. These datasets are needed to fully understand the affordability and accessibility of the UK's food supply, and are currently years behind giving accurate insight to answer the question asked by the committee.

Support for businesses

Is the Government providing sufficient support and guidance for agricultural and food exporters and importers, and how could that support be improved?

6.1 I highlight that the government's current domestic policy and UK trade strategy are not always aligned in ways that would consistently support agricultural and food exporters and importers.

6.2 Domestic policies surrounding immigration and labour are reducing the effectiveness of the UK's agricultural and food policy ambitions. For skilled worker visas, eligibility criteria are constrictive; moreover, the number and duration of these visas are insufficient to meet the labour needs of the agricultural and food sectors.

6.3 Likewise, public procurement policy could better support UK agriculture and food, but (as discussed in 2.2) there are issues relating to coherence between domestic and trade policy.

6.4 Our Report (see O2T4-P2-21.01-DA/01) also highlighted a lack of UK and Scottish data investigating the 'missing middle' of food systems, i.e. limited information on processing, wholesale, hospitality etc. This makes the assessment of wider food systems impacts lower in granularity. We have not yet modelled the full impacts of trade policy on the 'missing middle'. This means that all specific support policy options have not fully been investigated, for all food-related sectors.

In conclusion

7.1 There is a lack of coherence between domestic, devolved, and trade food policy. This is constraining ambition, reducing effectiveness, and undermining the capacity of policy to deliver the best outcomes for UK citizens and UK food and agriculture.

7.2 Ambitious policy options are being consulted and developed, such as revisions to the Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services; The Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022, or Draft Food (Wales) Bill. However, UK trade policy may not always cohere with these domestic policies.

7.3 We need better, more granular, and more up-to-date data to support and develop coherent trade, agriculture and food policy.


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<https://www.city.ac.uk/about/people/academics/christian-reynolds>




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