



Coronavirus: Food Supply and Food Security Debate on 14 May 2020

On 14 May 2020, Baroness Boycott (Crossbench) is due to move “that the virtual proceedings do consider food supply and security in the United Kingdom in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic.”

According to several organisations and trade bodies, the coronavirus pandemic has affected the UK’s food supply chain in various ways. In food production, the National Farmers Union, for example, has highlighted the effect on the dairy industry, which it says has been “hit severely”. This it largely attributes to the “almost complete closure” of food service and hospitality outlets. In distribution, freight organisations, such as the UK Chamber of Shipping, have warned that without long-term financial support from the Government and fast-track coronavirus testing for its staff, the availability of imported food could be affected. Disruptions in the supply chain have also affected consumer access and food availability, for example with reports of panic-buying food items, resulting in shortages of some items, such as pasta and canned goods. Key workers and those self-isolating from the virus have experienced difficulties accessing food.

The Government and food industry have expressed confidence in the resilience of the UK’s food supply chain. The Government contends that supply chains remain “highly resilient”. This it owes to the capacity of food supply sectors and the “high degree” of being able to substitute food items. To further ensure the resilience of food supply chains, the Government has introduced several measures. They include loans for producers and large businesses, such as the coronavirus large business interruption loan; the temporarily relaxation of certain elements of competition law; and funding to allow ferry routes to continue operating. In addition, the latest government guidance on who can be tested for coronavirus now includes those involved in food production, processing, distribution, sale, and delivery.

Supermarkets have also sought to increase food availability for consumers, in particular key workers and those considered “vulnerable” by the Government. This has seen supermarkets introducing extended operating hours for vulnerable people, such as those aged 70 or above, and for key workers, and increasing the number of online delivery slots available.

However, there have been recent calls for a review of the just-in-time food supply chain and concerns about the UK’s reliance on food imports. The Government’s latest figures for the trade of food and drink show that 53 percent of UK food consumption in 2018 was supplied from within the UK. UN officials have recently discouraged countries from introducing protectionist food policies in response to coronavirus.

Eren Waitzman | 7 May 2020

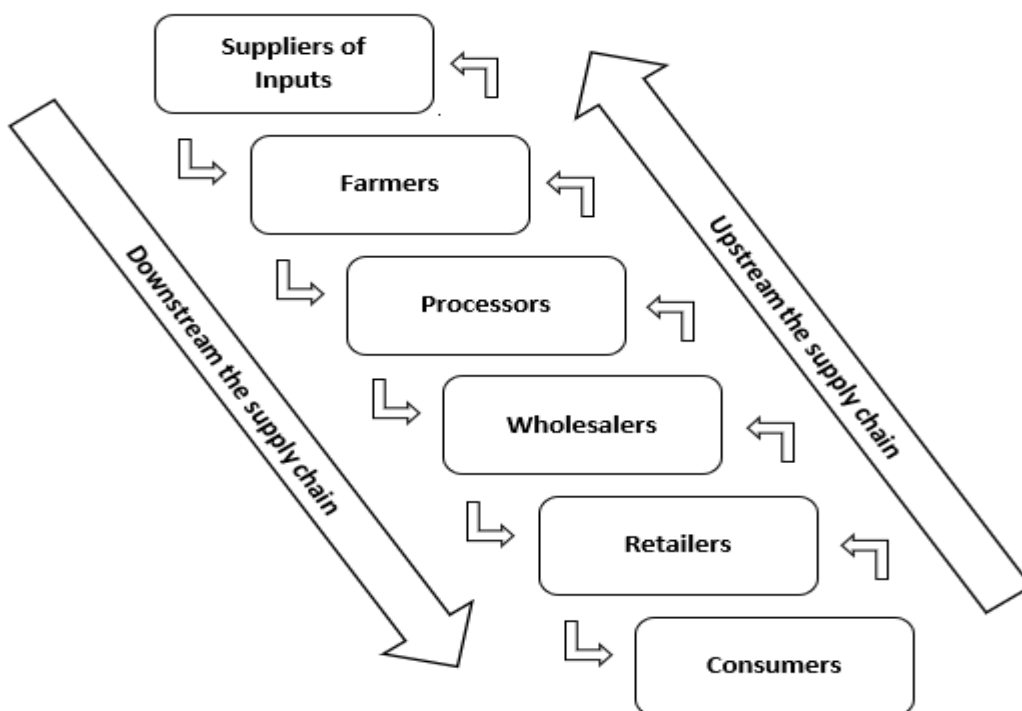
A full list of Lords Library briefings is available on the [research briefings page](#) on the internet. The Library publishes briefings for all major items of business debated in the House of Lords. The Library also publishes briefings on the House of Lords itself and other subjects that may be of interest to Members. Library briefings are compiled for the benefit of Members of the House of Lords and *their* personal staff, to provide impartial, authoritative, politically balanced briefing on subjects likely to be of interest to Members of the Lords. Authors are available to discuss the contents of the briefings with the Members and their staff but cannot advise members of the general public.

Any comments on Library briefings should be sent to the Head of Research Services, House of Lords Library, London SW1A 0PW or emailed to purvism@parliament.uk.

Current UK food supply levels

The value of the UK food supply chain was estimated to be worth £111 billion in 2017.¹ In a food supply chain, there are many links required for an item to go from production to consumption. The figure below represents the supply chain of an agri-food product, for example, milk. It shows that whilst goods flow down the supply chain, information flows upwards from the end of the chain. Information includes consumer preferences and changes in taste.

Figure 1: the supply chain of an agricultural product²



Food production to supply ratios (self-sufficiency)

An indicator of the UK's agricultural ability to meet consumer demand is the food production to supply ratio.³ According to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), a high production to supply ratio "fails to insulate a country against many possible disruptions to its supply chain".⁴ In 2018, the ratio was 61% for all food and 75% for indigenous food (which cannot be produced in the UK). In 2017, the ratio was 60% and 75% respectively, showing "very little change".⁵

¹ Committee on Climate Change, [Resilient Food Supply Chains](#), July 2019, p 4.

² Montserrat Costa-Font and Cesar Revoredo-Giha, '[Covid-19: the underlying issues affecting the UK's food supply chains](#)', London School of Economics and Political Science's Business Review, 25 March 2020.

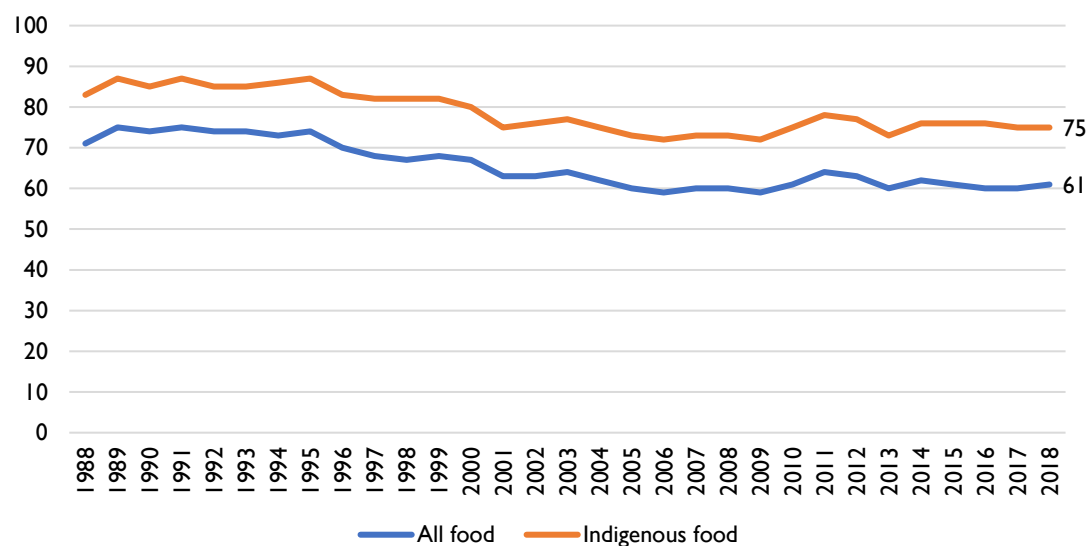
³ The ratio is calculated as the farm-gate value of raw food production (including for export) divided by the value of raw food for human consumption.

⁴ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, '[Food statistics in your pocket: global and UK supply](#)', updated 3 March 2020.

⁵ *ibid.*

The following chart details the food production to supply ratio in the UK since 1988.

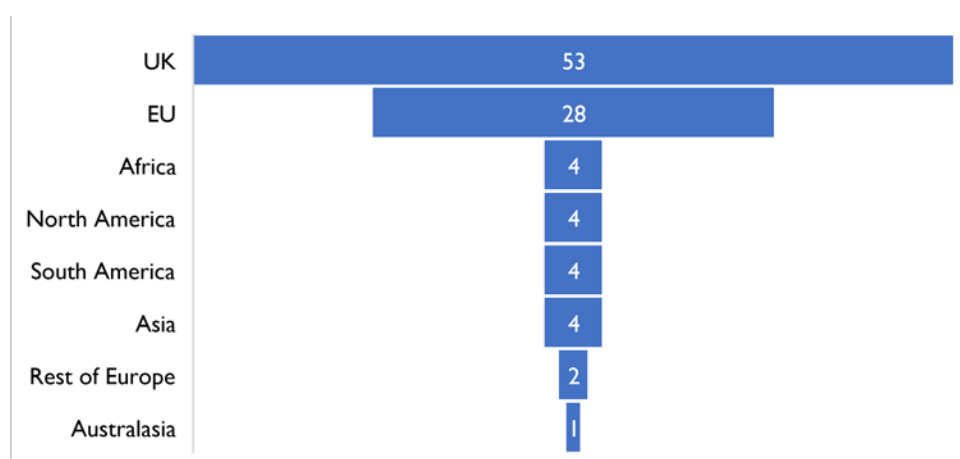
Chart 1: UK food production to supply ratio, 1988 to 2018⁶



UK trade in food and drink

The Government's latest figures for the trade of food and drink shows that the UK supplied over half (53 percent) of the food consumed in the UK. The leading foreign supplier of food consumed in the UK were EU countries (28 percent), whilst Africa, Asia, North and South America each supplied 4 percent of all food consumed in the UK.

Chart 2: origins of food consumed in the UK, percentage, 2018⁷



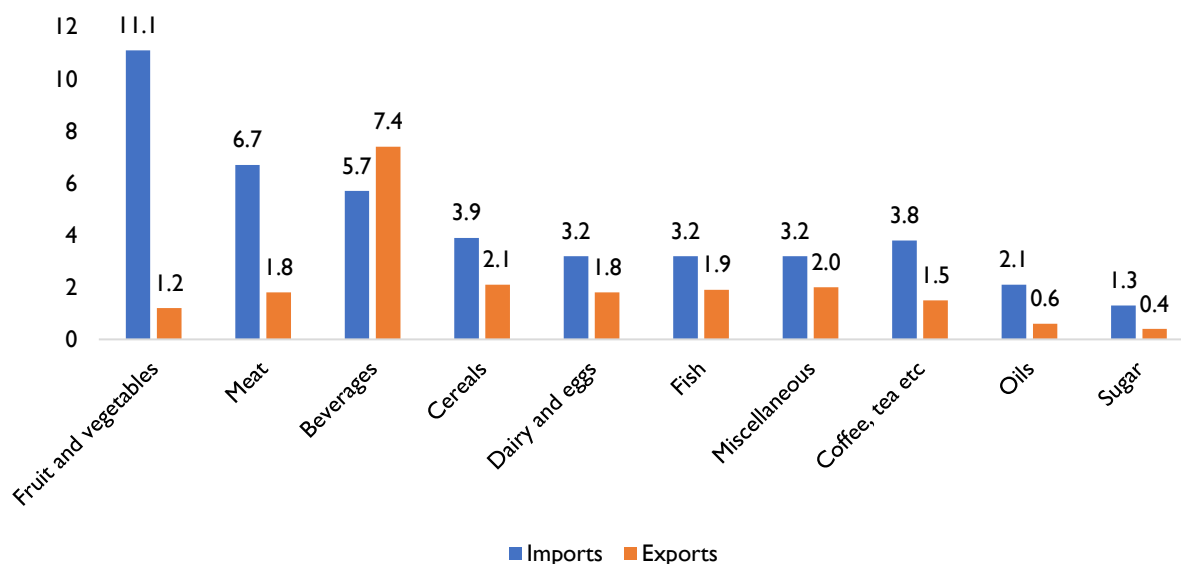
In 2017, the value of imports in food and drink to the UK was greater than the value of exports, except for 'beverages' which had a trade surplus of £1.71 billion. This was largely due to exports of

⁶ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, '[Food statistics in your pocket: global and UK supply](#)', updated 3 March 2020.

⁷ *ibid.* Please note that the UK figure above consists of UK domestic production minus UK exports.

Scotch Whisky. The trade of different food and drink groups in the UK for 2017 is outlined in the chart below:

Chart 3: UK trade in different food and drink groups, £ billions, 2017⁸



The Government's figures show that in 2017, the UK imported £11.1 billion worth of fruit and vegetables—which is the largest trade of a food group. Fruit and vegetables also had the largest trade deficit, with a gap of £9.9 billion. Following trade in fruit and vegetables, the largest groups in terms of imports to the UK are meat at £6.7 billion and beverages at £5.7 billion.⁹

How is coronavirus affecting supply chains?

The following sections provide examples from different sectors of some of the ways the coronavirus pandemic has affected different parts of the food supply chain in the UK. It is not exhaustive but is intended to highlight some of the current developments and challenges.

Food production

Ahead of the fruit and vegetable picking season, which began in the UK in April and May 2020, agricultural associations warned that the coronavirus pandemic could result in the British farming industry failing to fill the seasonal picking jobs required. This could leave agricultural produce rotting in fields. According to Nick Marston, chair of industry body British Summer Fruits, the sector was expecting a “significant shortfall” in workers from outside the UK applying for these positions, which he described as “worrying”.

⁸ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, [‘Food statistics in your pocket 2017: global and UK supply’](#), updated 3 March 2020.

⁹ *ibid.* Please note that on the webpage, the department has incorrectly calculated a trade deficit for fruit and vegetables of £9.8 billion.

The *Telegraph* reported that some large farms had begun chartering flights to bring in seasonal workers from Eastern Europe. Similar plans by the National Farmers' Union, Association of Labour Providers and Concordia had been halted, following countries going into lockdown and airlines being grounded in response to the pandemic.¹⁰ Consequently, to fill the available fruit and vegetable picking vacancies, British Summer Fruits had set up a webpage providing an interactive map for job seekers to find available jobs in their local area.¹¹

The National Farmers Union (NFU) has also highlighted the impact of the pandemic on different producers. For example, it has said the dairy industry has been “hit severely” and is campaigning for increased government support for farmers.¹² In April, the NFU reported the “almost complete closure of food service and hospitality outlets has meant the loss of market for around eight million litres of milk per week”. It said “already, a quarter of all dairy farmers in England and Wales have been hit financially as a result”.

Press reports have noted the increased consumer demand for flour in supermarkets.¹³ The National Association of British and Irish Millers (Nabim) has said the sector had “responded superbly to the challenges of meeting increased demand and keeping the nation fed”.¹⁴ Nabim noted the success of its ‘flour map’, which was created to put home bakers in touch with suppliers of commercial-size bags of flour.¹⁵

Food distribution

The coronavirus pandemic has affected food distribution in the UK, particularly the airline, freight transport and shipping industries. Although border disruption is expected because of the coronavirus pandemic, food supplies continue to be flown into the UK on cargo planes. In March 2020, the chief executive officer at Heathrow Airport, John Holland-Kaye, said the airport was “repurposing its operation and scaling up its cargo offering” to “weather this storm”. Mr Holland-Kaye noted that during normal operations, the airport usually handled 47 cargo-only planes per week. In contrast, on 31 March 2020, the airport was forecast to handle 48 cargo-only planes in a single day.¹⁶

The freight transport industry has said that it is “capable” of dealing with challenges arising from the pandemic. In a press release on the Freight Transport Association’s website at the start of the pandemic, Elizabeth de Jong, the group’s policy director, stated the industry was used to “reacting to extreme disruption”. However, Ms de Jong, called on the Government for support in creating contingency plans to address driver shortages caused by sickness, in addition to a “lack of compliance testing resource”, to ensure that freight operators could “continue to operate legally and effectively”.¹⁷

¹⁰ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, [‘Food statistics in your pocket 2017: global and UK supply’](#), updated 3 March 2020.

¹¹ Pip Sloan, [‘UK farmers desperately need people to pick fruit and vegetable: here’s what you can do to help’](#), *Telegraph* (£), 3 April 2020.

¹² National Farmers Union, [‘MPs urged to support British dairy sector’](#), 28 April 2020.

¹³ Xanthe Clay, [‘Why is there still a flour shortage in the UK?’](#), *Telegraph* (£), 28 April 2020.

¹⁴ National Association of British and Irish Millers, [‘Working together to combat Covid-19’](#), 1 May 2020.

¹⁵ National Association of British and Irish Millers, [‘Our flour map “breaks the internet”’](#), 1 May 2020.

¹⁶ Simon Read, [‘Coronavirus: Why are planes still flying?’](#), BBC News, 30 March 2020.

¹⁷ Freight Transport Association, [‘Resilient’ supply chain ready to tackle COVID challenge, says FTA’](#), 19 March 2020.

In contrast, shipping companies had previously warned that without long-term financial support from the Government and fast-track testing for its staff, food imports could be affected. The UK Chamber of Shipping, a trade body whose members include P&O Ferries and Stena, argued that ferry operators—which carry passengers and food supply trucks—were facing losses because of a large decrease in passenger numbers.

Consumer access

In March 2020, the Food Foundation estimated 17.7 million people were at a higher risk of contracting the coronavirus, as they were elderly, had underlying health conditions, or were pregnant.¹⁸ In addition, many households and individuals were self-isolating and unable to leave their home.¹⁹ This has impacted many people’s abilities to visit grocery stores and access basic food items, such as rice, pasta and tinned goods.

More recent data from the Food Foundation, published in May 2020, revealed that since the lockdown, more than five million people living in households with children under 18 years of age had “experienced food insecurity”. The organisation found that approximately 500,000 children who usually relied on free school meals had received no substitutes since the lockdown came into effect in March 2020.²⁰

Food banks are also experiencing a surge in demand.²¹ The Food Foundation has reported the rise in demand because millions of people have experienced either a fall in income, through reduced working hours for example, or losing their jobs. According to the Trussell Trust, a charity whose aim is to end the need for food banks in the UK, there was an 81 percent increase in demand for emergency food parcels from food banks in its network during the last two weeks of March 2020, compared to the same period in 2019.²² The charity said the spread of coronavirus had left food banks facing an “unprecedented challenge and uncertain future”. Emma Revie, the chief executive of the Trussell Trust, has called on the Government to “build on the foundations [it] has laid” and to introduce emergency measures to “ensure people can make ends meet during this crisis”.²³

Food availability

On 20 March 2020, the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, announced that all restaurants, cafes and pubs were to close, with the exception being take-away food services.²⁴ According to Defra’s 2017/18

¹⁸ Food Foundation, ‘[COVID-19: latest impact on food](#)’, March 2020.

¹⁹ Food Foundation, ‘[COVID-19: latest impact on food](#)’, March 2020. The Food Foundation has not provided estimates for the number of people self-isolating.

²⁰ Food Foundation, ‘[New poll data: more than five million people in households with children have experienced food insecurity since lockdown began](#)’, May 2020.

²¹ According to the Department for Work and Pensions, from 16 to 25 March 2020, the department received approximately 477,000 new applications for universal credit. House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, [Oral evidence: the DWP’s response to the coronavirus outbreak, HC 178](#), 25 March 2020, Q6.

²² The Trussell Trust, ‘[Food banks report record spike in need as coalition of anti-poverty charities call for strong lifeline to be thrown to anyone who needs it](#)’, 1 May 2020.

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Heather Stewart and Peter Walker, ‘[Coronavirus UK: Boris Johnson announces closure of all UK pubs and restaurants](#)’, *Guardian*, 21 March 2020.

Living Costs and Food Survey, £13.92 (30.8 percent) of the £45.31 total expenditure that a person spends on food and drink on average per week is spent on eating out.²⁵ The closure of such outlets has shifted demand largely towards grocery shopping.

A surge in purchasing affected food availability in March—described by some as ‘panic buying’. This resulted in people stockpiling food items; empty supermarket shelves; and long queues to enter supermarkets. In March 2020, the *Financial Times* reported that in the first week of the month, sales of canned meat, pasta and tinned soup had “spiked” in the UK by more than 60 percent compared with the same week in 2019.²⁶

Panic buying particularly impacted key workers, such as frontline medical workers, who have small windows in which they can visit supermarkets, often at the end of the working day. This resulted in some key workers being unable to source basic food items.²⁷ In response, supermarkets introduced extended operating hours to vulnerable people, such as those aged 70 or above, and key workers, for example, those who work in the NHS.²⁸ In April 2020, Tesco stated that it planned to increase online delivery availability to 1.2 million slots a month. In comparison, Tesco offered 590,000 online delivery slots to consumers in March 2020.²⁹

However, those considered “vulnerable” by the Government have continued to struggle to find home delivery slots allocated by supermarkets. In May 2020, the consumer rights group, Which?, reported that it had been contacted by more than 1,000 people who were either disabled, elderly or had an illness which put them at risk of contracting coronavirus, who were “struggling” to get access to basic food and supplies. Additionally, the disability charity, Scope, found that 38 percent of the 600 disabled adults it had surveyed had unsuccessfully tried to book a supermarket delivery slot in the previous three weeks.³⁰

For those who have managed to get a home delivery slot from a supermarket, some have reported not receiving all their items. In May 2020, evidence gathered by the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, found that four in five consumers had been unable to get a full online grocery shop. According to the chair of the committee, Neil Parish (Conservative MP for Tiverton and Honiton), the evidence was “concerning” and that the committee would be asking supermarkets about this issue later in the inquiry.³¹

What action has the Government taken?

This section sets out some of the actions the Government has taken to address issues arising in food supply chains. It is not exhaustive but intended to highlight some of the key developments.

²⁵ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, ‘[Family food 2017/18](#)’, updated 11 February 2020, chart 1.1.

²⁶ Jonathan Eley and Judith Evans, ‘[UK food suppliers battle to fill the empty shelves](#)’, *Financial Times*, 19 March 2020.

²⁷ Dawn Bilbrough, ‘[Nurse in tears after coronavirus panic buying leaves shelves empty of food—video](#)’, *Guardian*, 20 March 2020.

²⁸ Sabrina Barr, ‘[Coronavirus: what measures have UK supermarkets put in place to encourage social distancing?](#)’, *Independent*, 30 March 2020.

²⁹ Emma Munbodh, ‘[Tesco adds 200,000 more delivery slots online to help vulnerable shoppers](#)’, *Mirror*, 30 April 2020.

³⁰ Sarah Butler, ‘[Food deliveries to vulnerable in UK ‘need better coordination](#)’, *Guardian*, 5 May 2020.

³¹ Sam Meadows, ‘[Four in five have struggled to get a full online food shop. MPs told](#)’, *Telegraph* (£), 4 May 2020.

Food production

To ensure the farming sector has access to financial support to ease cashflow problems during the pandemic, the Government has announced several measures. This includes the coronavirus business interruption loan, which helps businesses with an annual turnover of more than £45 million apply for loans of up to £25 million;³² and the bounce back loan scheme, which allows small businesses to apply for loans up to £50,000.³³ On 6 May 2020, the Government also announced new funding to support dairy farmers, who will be able to access up to £10,000 each to cover 70 percent of their lost income during April and May, as a result of the pandemic.³⁴

In addition, the Government has “temporarily relaxed” certain elements of competition law to support the agricultural sector affected by disruption caused by the pandemic. Further, the Government has said legislation would be laid “shortly” to enable collaboration between dairy farmers and producers, to support the sector in adapting to changes in the supply chain, for example, decreased demand for dairy produce from the hospitality sector.³⁵

In response to labour shortages, the Government launched the ‘Pick for Britain’ campaign in April 2020 to recruit the public to work on farms.³⁶ In a press briefing on 26 April 2020, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, George Eustice, had called on workers who had been furloughed to temporarily work as fruit and vegetable pickers. Estimating that only a third of the migrant labour in the industry had arrived in the UK prior to the nationwide lockdown, Mr Eustice said the Government was working with the agricultural industry to “identify an approach” that would encourage millions of people in the UK to apply for such jobs. Mr Eustice argued that “we [the Government] anticipate that there will be a need to recruit staff for those sectors in the month of June”.³⁷ However, Concordia—who were running the campaign along with two other labour providers—has said only 150 people had taken up jobs despite the campaign gathering 50,000 expressions of interest. Concordia attributed the low recruitment level to several factors. These included candidates being unable to accept the length of contract, farms being too far from applicants’ homes, and people not wanting to travel or commute.³⁸

Food distribution

The Government has announced the temporary removal of the requirement for lorry drivers to provide a doctor’s medical report as part of the lorry driving licence renewal process. The Government argued that this would ensure that those who were “fit to drive” could “continue delivering goods around the country”.³⁹

³² Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, ‘[Apply for the Coronavirus Large Business Interruption Loan Scheme](#)’, updated 4 May 2020.

³³ HM Treasury, ‘[New Bounce Back Loans to launch today](#)’, 4 May 2020.

³⁴ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, ‘[New funding to support dairy farmers through coronavirus](#)’, 6 May 2020.

³⁵ House of Commons, ‘[Written Question: Food supply—Coronavirus](#)’, 1 May 2020, 38523.

³⁶ Philip Case, ‘[Coronavirus: Defra launches Pick for Britain website](#)’, *Farmers Weekly*, 21 April 2020.

³⁷ Elisa Menendez, ‘[Supermarket food stocks ‘back to normal’, minister declares](#)’, *Metro*, 26 April 2020.

³⁸ Judith Evans, ‘[Time runs short for UK to recruit tens of thousands of fruit pickers](#)’, *Financial Times* (£), 29 April 2020.

³⁹ Department for Transport, ‘[Government takes further action to support bus and lorry drivers who are keeping the country moving](#)’, 17 April 2020.

On 24 April 2020, the Secretary of State for Transport, Grant Shapps, announced that the Government had secured a trilateral agreement with the French and Irish Governments, which had committed the countries to keeping freight routes open during the pandemic. In addition, the Government is providing funding of up to £17million to protect ferry routes between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The Government is also supplying funding of up to £10.5million to allow freight services to continue between the Isle of Wight and the Scilly Isles.⁴⁰ In response, the chief executive of the UK Chamber of Shipping, Bob Sanguinetti, welcomed the measures. He said the trade body would “study the detail of the package closely” to ensure that it provided “sufficient capacity and resilience over the coming days and weeks”.⁴¹

Consumer access and food availability

The Government has introduced a support system for those with underlying health conditions and at “highest clinical risk” of contracting coronavirus, who have been asked to self-isolate during the epidemic. This support includes those at highest risk receiving a free grocery pack.⁴²

The Government has introduced food parcels for those self-isolating from coronavirus. The deliveries are organised by government in partnership with the grocery industry, local government, and local resilience forums.⁴³ On 29 March 2020, the Government announced that the first 2,000 food parcels had been delivered, with 50,000 set to be delivered by the following week. The parcels have “essential” food items such as fruit, pasta, and tinned goods. As of 30 April 2020, the Government reported 955,433 food parcels had been delivered nationally.⁴⁴ However, the Government has previously been criticised for the items contained in the parcels, which had, in some cases, included unhealthy items such as chocolate. Allen Brett, the leader of Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council has argued that the parcels provided “were not of the quality we [the council] were expecting”. In response, a Government spokesperson contended that food boxes sent to the council were not the ones being sent to extremely vulnerable people, and were, instead, additional supplies.⁴⁵

The Government has said it has held discussions with supermarkets to “try to ensure that food banks retained access to food supplies to help the most vulnerable”.⁴⁶ On 3 April 2020, the Government announced a £3 million fund for food redistribution organisations to help them cut food waste and redistribute up to 14,000 tonnes of surplus stock during the pandemic.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Department for Transport, ‘[Transport Secretary’s statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\): 24 April 2020](#)’, 24 April 2020.

⁴¹ UK Chamber of Shipping, ‘[UK Chamber reacts to government funding announcement](#)’, 24 April 2020.

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, ‘[First food parcels delivered to clinically vulnerable people](#)’, 29 March 2020.

⁴⁴ House of Commons, ‘[Written question: food—coronavirus](#)’, 4 May 2020, 39588.

⁴⁵ Milo Boyd et al, ‘[Council leader slams ‘coronavirus care packages containing Dairy Milk and Crunchies’](#)’, Daily Mirror, 31 March 2020.

⁴⁶ Henry Bodkin and Phoebe Southworth, ‘[British shoppers hoard food worth £1bn—and should be ‘ashamed’](#)’, *Daily Telegraph* (£), 21 March 2020.

⁴⁷ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, ‘[Cash support for food redistribution during coronavirus outbreak](#)’, 3 April 2020.

During the pandemic, the Government has introduced guidance to the public on social distancing when shopping.⁴⁸ To protect their staff and customers, all supermarkets in the United Kingdom have introduced social distancing measures. This includes restricting the number of customers in a store at any given time and two-meter markers at queues both inside and outside the store. On 26 April 2020, George Eustice stated that such measures had led to the food supply chain seeing a “significant reduction” in staff absences over recent weeks.⁴⁹ In addition, the latest Government guidance on who can be tested for coronavirus now includes those involved in food production, processing, distribution, sale and delivery.⁵⁰

On 29 April 2020, Defra published guidance for the public for accessing food and essential supplies. This included information for those considered “clinically extremely vulnerable” to contact the NHS Volunteer Responders programme, who are tasked with running errands for those self-isolating. This includes going grocery shopping and collecting prescriptions.⁵¹

The Government has detailed the steps it was taking to engage with food manufacturers and the food manufacturing supply chain to protect food availability. In response to a written question in May 2020, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at Defra, Victoria Prentis, said the Government has “regular engagement” with industry to discuss any other support that the Government could provide. Ms Prentis also noted that the Government had “temporarily relaxed certain elements of competition law” to ensure that the food sector could “work together to keep putting food on the shelves”.⁵²

Emergency legislation: Coronavirus Act 2020

The Government introduced emergency legislation to “help systems and services work more effectively in tackling the outbreak”.⁵³ Sections 25 to 29 of the Act focus on food supply:

- **Section 25** provides for an “appropriate authority” to require information from a person in, or closely connected to, a food supply chain to provide information about their activity within that supply chain;
- **Section 26** details the authorities that may require such information about supply chains. They include: the Secretary of State; Scottish and Welsh ministers; and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland;
- **Section 27** places restrictions on the use and disclosure of information received. Restrictions include bodies disclosing information to another person for the same purposes; anonymising information for bodies which are not a government authority; and limiting the use and disclosure of information containing personal data authorised by data protection legislation.

⁴⁸ Food Standards Agency, ‘[Guidance for consumers on coronavirus \(COVID-19\) and food](#)’, updated 25 April 2020.

⁴⁹ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, ‘[Environment Secretary’s statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\): 26 April 2020](#)’, 26 April 2020.

⁵⁰ Department of Health and Social Care, ‘[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): getting tested](#)’, updated 4 May 2020.

⁵¹ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, ‘[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): accessing food and essential supplies](#)’, 29 April 2020.

⁵² House of Commons, ‘[Written Question: food supply—Coronavirus](#)’, 1 May 2020, 38523.

⁵³ Department of Health and Social Care, ‘[Coronavirus action plan: a guide to what you can expect across the UK](#)’, 3 March 2020.

- **Section 28** sets out the enforcement of requirement to provide information, with further information on financial penalties detailed in **schedule 15** of the Act. An example of a financial penalty is a maximum of one percent of qualifying turnover for not complying with the requirement or providing information that is either “false or misleading”; and
- **Section 29** details the term “food supply chain” and other related terms.⁵⁴

During the bill’s committee stage in the House of Commons, the Paymaster General at the Cabinet Office, Penny Mordaunt, stated that there were powers in the bill that the Government did not “wish to call on [...] particularly on food supply and so forth”. However, in what was an “incredibly unpredictable situation”, the Government would need to allow for “flexibility”.⁵⁵

Other factors that could affect food supply chain resilience

Outside of health pandemics, there are several factors that could affect the resilience of food supply chains in the UK. Among these are environmental disruption, agricultural labour and transport infrastructure. Each are explored below at a general level, though some may be more or less pertinent in a given part of the food chain.

Environmental disruption

Extreme weather is a longstanding risk in a food supply chain. In July 2018, Defra published its second national adaptation programme, which sets out the measures that government, businesses and society are taking to adapt to climate change. On food supply chains, the programme called on all parties to “ensure a food supply chain which is resilient to the effects of a changing climate”.⁵⁶

Defra argues that throughout their food supply chains, UK businesses are “exposed” to the “risks of extreme weather” around the world. This, in turn, suggests that climate change is expected to increase the risk of weather-related disruptions, particularly for supply chains that involve more “vulnerable” countries.⁵⁷

In Defra’s UK food security assessment, which last took place in 2010, potential risks to food supply chains because of extreme weather were identified. They included:

- Changing conditions affecting the extraction and/or production of raw materials used in the food production process. For example, damage to crops, which could lead to temporary or long-term reductions in agricultural product yields;
- Increased “climatic stress” on natural resources, which threatens production in “water-stressed regions” such as North Africa;
- Rising temperatures, which are likely to improve crop yields in the shorter term in

⁵⁴ Coronavirus Act 2020, s25–9.

⁵⁵ [HC Hansard, 23 March 2020, col 134](#).

⁵⁶ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, [The National Adaptation Programme and the Third Strategy for Climate Adaptation Reporting](#), July 2018, p v.

⁵⁷ *ibid*, p 58.

- countries in the northern hemisphere, but “threaten” yields in other, developing regions; and
- Damage to facilities, buildings, equipment, and products involved in the food production process, including loss of power for production and water.⁵⁸

In 2018, the results of a survey into food supply chain resilience by companies working in UK food supply found that 70 percent of respondents expected disruption to their own supply chains because of adverse weather. In addition, 69 percent of all respondents had a contingency plan for environmental disruptions.⁵⁹

Agricultural labour supply

The UK’s withdrawal from the EU has highlighted a labour supply dependency for the agricultural industry. Organisations such as the National Farmers Union (NFU) have argued that Brexit could affect the number and availability of agricultural labour. This in turn affects the supply of agricultural produce to the country.

The Office for National Statistics argues that it is difficult to know the size of the agricultural labour market and the role of migrants because there are no official data sources. Therefore, data for this market has often been taken from several sources.⁶⁰

The NFU’s supply of seasonal labour data is the only source that identifies the nationality of seasonal workers in agriculture. It does this by asking recruiters what countries their workers are recruited from. In December 2017, the NFU published its seasonal labour survey analysis. It found that in the horticultural industry in the UK, 99 percent of agency-sourced seasonal labour were EU nationals (67 percent from EU2 countries, such as Romania, and 32 percent from EU8 countries, for example, Poland).⁶¹

In September 2018, the Government announced a new pilot scheme for the employment of seasonal agricultural workers. The scheme would allow fruit and vegetable farmers to employ migrant workers for a period of up to six months. The scheme would be capped at 2,500 workers a year, as part of a two-year trial.⁶² The pilot opened on 6 March 2019 and will run until December 2020.⁶³ In February 2020, the scheme was extended to 10,000 workers.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Committee on Climate Change, [Resilient Food Supply Chains](#), July 2019, p 7.

⁵⁹ ARUP, [Understanding UK Grocery Supply Chain Resilience](#), 2019, p 4. The survey conducted by ARUP, a consultancy company, asked 43 companies in the UK food supply sector such as producers, logistics firms and retailers about the potential impact of certain factors on their supply chains.

⁶⁰ Office for National Statistics, [Labour in the agriculture industry, UK: February 2018](#), 6 February 2018.

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, [New pilot scheme to bring 2,500 seasonal workers to UK farms](#), 6 September 2018.

⁶³ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, [Seasonal workers pilot opens](#), 6 March 2019.

⁶⁴ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, [10,000 workers to boost British farming sector](#), 19 February 2020.

Transport infrastructure

The ability of supply chains to resist disruption is dependent on the strength of its transport infrastructure. According to the Government, this is because the food sector operates just-in-time supply chains, which requires “sophisticated logistics operations and contingency plans” to respond to potential disruption.⁶⁵ Just-in-time supply chains rely on supermarkets ordering stock into their stores on a daily basis, based on the demands of each individual store. In the UK, the operation of such supply chains takes place at a supermarket’s distribution centre. Suppliers send goods to these centres, with orders then processed and loaded onto trucks for delivery to supermarkets.⁶⁶

In November 2017, the Government published its industrial strategy, which set out the Government’s long-term plan to boost UK productivity. In the strategy, the Government announced that it would fund a new major road network, with the aim of improving transport connectivity by targeting funding at “strategically important local authority ‘A’ roads”.⁶⁷ To support the aims of the industrial strategy, in December 2017, the Department for Transport published a separate strategy to improve transport infrastructure efficiency.⁶⁸ In March 2019, the Department published a review of the strategy.⁶⁹

In March 2020, the Government published its second road investment strategy for the period April 2020 to March 2025. The strategy detailed the Government’s long-term vision for what the road network should look like in 2050 and listed ongoing and future improvement projects which sought to alleviate congestion on the road networks. As part of this, the Government said that it intended to “better” connect ports and airports to support exporters and “develop new business opportunities”. The Government also confirmed that £27.4 billion of funding would be provided to Highways England to complete the work.⁷⁰

The future relationship between the UK and EU could also affect transport infrastructure, including on roads near the English Channel and at ports. In 2018, researchers at Imperial College London warned that checks at borders, such as ports, could lead to “paralysis” of nearby motorways. Using simulations to estimate vehicle checks at borders in Dover and Folkestone, both in Kent, researchers found that two extra minutes spent checking each vehicle at the borders could more than triple queues on the M20 and A20 to 29 miles. They also reported that at peak times, Kent could see traffic delays of nearly five hours.⁷¹

Future security of food supply chains

The Government contends that food supply chains remain “highly resilient”,⁷² which it owes to the capacity of food supply sectors and the “high degree” of being able to substitute food items. In a 2018

⁶⁵ Cabinet Office, [Public Summary of Sector Security and Resilience Plans](#), 2018, p 17.

⁶⁶ Alex Lee, [‘How the UK’s just-in-time delivery model crumbled under coronavirus’](#), Wired.co.uk, 30 March 2020.

⁶⁷ UK Government, [Industrial Strategy: Building a Britain Fit for the Future](#), November 2017, pp 137–8.

⁶⁸ Department for Transport, [Transport Infrastructure Efficiency Strategy](#), 6 December 2017, p 34.

⁶⁹ Department for Transport, [Transport Infrastructure Efficiency Strategy: One Year on Report](#), March 2019, pp 15–6.

⁷⁰ Department for Transport, [Road Investment Strategy 2: 2020–2025](#), March 2020, p 25.

⁷¹ Caroline Brogan, [‘How Imperial’s findings on post-Brexit borders caught the eyes of politicians’](#), Imperial College London, 31 May 2018.

⁷² House of Commons, [‘Written Question: Supermarkets—Coronavirus’](#), 28 April 2020, 37914.

paper, the Government argued that this resilience had been demonstrated, for example in the response to the 2015 flooding; the 2010 Icelandic volcanic ash clouds; and the 2009 H1N1 (Swine flu) pandemic.⁷³

In 2018, the Cabinet Office published a summary of sector security and resilience plans, including an assessment of the existing resilience of the food sector. The assessment found that Defra had “well established mechanisms” for engaging with the food industry. It also noted that the Government had been working with food industry sectors, across Government and with the devolved administrations, to undertake contingency planning for several EU exit scenarios, including the UK leaving the EU without a deal.⁷⁴

Turning to the future resilience of supply chains, the Cabinet Office detailed how the Government and food sector would continue to work together to ensure the resilience of food supply in the UK. Collaboration would include:

- Building on recent research into the resilience of food supply with the Food Chain Emergency Liaison Group to respond to and recover from maritime transport disruption resulting from a major coastal flooding event;
- Building resilience in supply chains to extreme weather events; and
- Providing good practice guidance on cyber security. Last November, Defra published guidance on protecting food and drink from malicious attack, which includes specific advice on cyber security.⁷⁵

In addition, the Government said that Defra had started a review of the UK Food Security Assessment, which was last published in 2010. The Government describes the UK Food Security Assessment as a “comprehensive analysis of all aspects of food security”.⁷⁶

Change of strategy?

In the wake of the pandemic, there have been calls for a review of the just-in-time food supply chain. For example, Dr Ludivine Petetin, a senior lecturer in law at Cardiff University, has said changes in global markets could lead to worldwide food shortages. Citing countries such as Cambodia and Vietnam, who have banned the export of rice to prioritise feeding their own populations, Dr Petetin noted that under the current supply chain, “as soon as you have a disruption [...] this has an impact on the availability of food on the shelves.”⁷⁷ Dr Petetin said a solution lay in supermarkets buying more food from local suppliers because it “reduces food miles, [has a better] environmental impact, it also involves less processing”.⁷⁸

In March 2020, the *Guardian* reported that Maximo Torero, chief economist of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, had warned countries against protectionist food policies in response to

⁷³ Cabinet Office, [Public Summary of Sector Security and Resilience Plans](#), 2018, p 17.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ Caroline Evans, [‘Coronavirus: food supply chains ‘need a rethink’](#), BBC News, 3 May 2020.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

coronavirus. He said, “the worst that can happen is that governments restrict the flow of food” and argued for governments to resist calls to protect their own food supply by restricting exports.⁷⁹

Further information

- House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, '[Covid-19 and food supply: all written evidence](#)', accessed 6 May 2020
- House of Commons Library, '[Coronavirus Act: food supply](#)', 31 March 2020
- Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology, '[Security of UK food supply](#)', June 2017

⁷⁹ Fiona Harvey, '[Coronavirus measures could cause global food shortage, UN warns](#)', *Guardian*, 26 March 2020.