

Global Food Safety Forum



Contact:

Anne Sansbury

Administrator/ USA

Tel. 301-799-0840

[asansbury@gicgroup.com](mailto:asansbury@gicgroup.com)

Web: [globalfoodsafetyforum.org](http://globalfoodsafetyforum.org)

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/foodsafetyforum>



**GFSF FOCUS** 2023

*Brexit: A Food Safety Challenge*

# Content

Brexit: A Food Safety Challenge

by

Thomas Gray, Senior Associate

In the wake of Brexit negotiations, the United Kingdom has embarked on a profound transformation, prioritizing food safety measures to safeguard its population. Departing from the EU single market and customs union, with implications primarily affecting Britain rather than Northern Ireland, has led to unique challenges in the nation's approach to food safety. The trading relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, characterized by a frictionless land border, raises pertinent questions about the practicality of isolating Northern Ireland from the EU. In this newsletter, I delve into the multifaceted implications of Brexit on the UK's food safety landscape, highlighted by regulatory divergence, supply chain disruptions, and consumer protection issues, aiming to provide nuanced insights for understanding the nation's dedicated pursuit of a robust and secure food system amidst evolving circumstances.

Following Brexit negotiations many decisions have been made by the UK government in the interest of prioritizing food safety for the population of the nation. Leaving the EU single market and customs union, which only applied to Britain and not Northern Ireland, has played a role in the nation's food safety. The trading relationship Northern Ireland has with the Republic of Ireland is shown through, "NI exports £1.15 bn-worth of food to the EU, about 70% of which goes to/through the ROI." With the frictionless land border the countries share, would it really make sense to section Northern Ireland off to remain outside of the EU. The argument against a hard Brexit ruling is further proven through, "The eastern side of Europe has 137 land border crossings along a border spanning 3,720 miles. By contrast there are currently 275 border crossings between NI and ROI, along a border spanning 300 miles. The vast majority of NI / ROI border crossings are small, minor roads and tracks, which make their 'policing' unrealistic and unfeasible." Clearly, adding a border with food inspection units maintained at each crossing would be highly unrealistic. Northern Ireland's position has helped them ensure food safety for their population, as untouched trade with the ROI has helped them avoid massive border overhauls. Ensuring food safety has also come in the form of various bills passed by parliament.

Following Brexit, The Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill was introduced to Parliament in May 2022. This bill has made it permissible to use Gene editing technologies previously banned by the EU. This will have significant effects for food safety in the UK, as the precision breeding techniques have a range of benefits. They allow farmers and producers to develop plant varieties and animals with beneficial traits more efficiently and precisely. This could be used to lessen plants' and animals' dependency on pesticides, fertilizers, and antibiotics as well as being used to breed out allergens and toxins from food. A less chemical-heavy and cleaner, more organic food offering will vastly improve the health of the United Kingdom for generations to come. Overall, regulatory divergence has changed the way the United Kingdom operates, as in the search for food safety harmonizing regulations has become an issue. On 7 August 2022, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) was to implement a ban of the food additive titanium dioxide in the EU following recent scientific developments. However, the FSA and FSS have decided not to follow EFSA advice, and they continue to test and assess the chemical while keeping it on the market. This shows the divergence the UK is taking to EU laws as they're focused on taking food safety into their own hands. This decision doesn't come without risk though. For businesses operating in both jurisdictions, in GB and the EU, the split from the EFSA ruling is likely to cause disruption and complications. FBO's must ensure the products they sell in Northern Ireland compared to Scotland contain different ingredients or they must omit titanium dioxide altogether. This could cause supply chain disruptions as food producers scramble to come up with suitable alternatives. This highlights challenges in harmonizing regulations the FSS and FSA face as FBO's will be forced to change recipes, which will need more food safety checks to keep the population healthy.

Prior to Brexit, British food retailers had taken advantage of the frictionless trade provided by the EU and traded freely. They used a "JIT retail-ordering system for EU-sourced fresh fruit and vegetables which worked on algorithms created by the in-store electronic point of sale (EPOS)

system.”<sup>1</sup> With a lead time of 1-2 days, this relied on safe passage to the UK which has now been changed by Brexit. Exporting companies now have to apply for an Export Health Certificate (EHC) from the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA), which has struggled to keep up with demand. Even with trade volumes at 50% of their original, APHA has only been able to process 250 EHC’s per day, whereas this number should be around 1000. This portrays the major disruptions that the food industry has been hit by. According to the meat industry, sending meat to the EU has become a logistical nightmare. The process of even allowing meat to leave the factory takes 20 documents and around 4-12 hours, which is then prolonged by the struggling APHA. If all the different parties involved aren’t working in perfect harmony, the export will be delayed. Furthermore, since December 2022, meat exports to the EU (70% of all UK meat exports) have required paper-based veterinary certificates. This requirement is obstructing meat exports, as there is a shortage of veterinarians able to certify meat for export. According to britishmeatindustry.org, food safety is then in question due to hastily performed food checks and spoiled meat. While exporters have been hit hard by Brexit, importers have also had their fair share of adapting to do. Previously the UK used the EU’s TRACES food tracking system, the Trade Control and Expert System. Upon leaving the EU, the UK government has gradually implemented the Import of Products, Animals, Food and Feed System (IPAFFS). It is a web-based service for the application for, and issuing of, Common Veterinary Entry Documents (CVEDs) for notifying UK authorities of movements of live animals, germplasm and certain other commodities into the UK from Third Countries. Scotland, England, and Wales have all implemented this apart from Northern Ireland, which, under their different trade agreement, will continue to use TRACES. However, the success of this tracing system coupled with unclear border inspection guidelines has received criticism. The food inspection teams at ports across the country have been advised to check only non-EU shipments until The Border Target

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/s43016-020-0097-7>

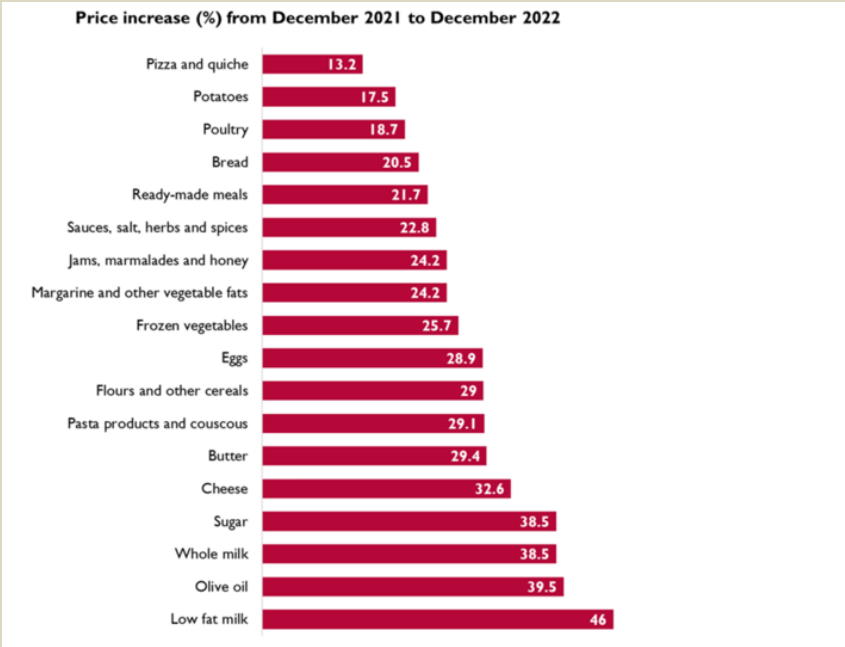
Operating Model is implemented in October 2023. This can't come quickly enough, as demonstrated while Dover port officials checked eastern European food lorries entering the UK. They searched 22 vehicles of Romanian, Moldovan, Ukrainian, and Polish origin: illegal meat imports were found in 21 of them. What's worrying is that even Poland, as a country within the EU, is allowing illegal exports of meat. This raises the question if all the EU meat being imported is safe. Should we be checking these imports as well? These concerns are shared by Minette Batters, the president of the National Farmers Union of England and Wales, who has accused ministers of a "dereliction of duty" over the lack of checks on EU goods. "We have the massive risk of African swine fever in Europe, and to not be investing in our defenses for keeping our biosecurity and animal and plant health safe, I think is just a dereliction of duty." Her worries have been proved right through a salmonella outbreak across the UK in early 2023. This outbreak is under investigation using Whole Genome Sequencing (WGS) but has strong links to eggs imported from Poland. This portrays the importance of implementing the Border Target Operating Model as soon as possible, which will introduce a new border surveillance and control system, hopefully re-establishing the nation's confidence in food safety checks. However, Britain hasn't been the only one to struggle through Brexit. Even with Northern Ireland's different exit strategy and remaining part of EU markets, their supply chains have still been disrupted. Their heavy reliance on Britain as a land bridge has rendered them vulnerable. The border controls in Britain have adversely affected the country as "...84% of businesses in Northern Ireland are dealing with increased costs, with 89% reporting increases in the time it takes to transport goods to or from overseas."<sup>2</sup> This has become a worrying problem for these markets as Conor Mulvihill of Ibec states that more than 90% of their European bound meat and dairy passes through the British land bridge. This conveys the second-hand impact Brexit has played on

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.northernirelandchamber.com/ni-chamber-news/brexit-one-year-on-new-report-assesses-the-costs-and-opportunities-for-business/>

Northern Ireland. Even though they opted to remain part of the EU from a trading standpoint, they have been forced into a difficult situation thanks to their reliance on the British Isles.

Post-Brexit consumer protection has been a large objective of the FSA. Ensuring the safety of the British population is paramount to their success. As conveyed earlier, border control teams have had a difficult task in catching illegal food shipments. The health of the British population has been put at risk, with diseases such as salmonella causing harm. However, the problems with consumer protection haven't stopped at that. Brexit-related trade barriers have driven a 6% increase in U.K. food prices, which has severely impacted the British population, as rising food prices coupled with high energy prices caused by the Russia-Ukraine conflict have caused lifestyle changes.



The chart above shows the price increases due to Brexit, with certain products increasing drastically compared to others. This can be contributed to supply chain problems, with delayed imports causing shortages, which has therefore increased prices. Consumer protection has been a major problem due to increases in food prices and food safety has paid the price. UK citizens

are unable to keep up the diet they once had, Close to half (46%) of adults in Great Britain said that they were buying less when shopping for food. And between April and August 2022, nearly 90% of IFAN food banks saw a rise in demand. IFAN also found 72% of food banks reported a drop in food donations. Food safety has been impacted thanks to rising prices, with people not being able to afford basic foods. Consumer protection has also been affected by the border controls not doing their job correctly. Consumers should be confident in eating food they buy in supermarkets around the country; however, food and drink recalls have increased by 62% and allergen recalls by 78% and the number of foreign bodies found in food and drinks has also increased 350%. The British people should be apprehensive about the food they're eating and to avoid foodborne illnesses perhaps buy from local farms and produce from the UK. This shows consumers aren't protected by the current border rules and the FSA must move fast to protect the health of the country.

Thus, slow moving government guidelines and poor border controls have negatively impacted food safety in the United Kingdom. Regulatory divergence, supply chain disruptions, and consumer protection problems have put the UK's consumers at risk to not only price increases but foodborne illnesses, some of which can be fatal. However, light is on the horizon with the implementation of the Border Targeting Operating Model coming in October 2023. With success, this will once again protect the British people from border control problems causing a lack of food safety. Officials from a multitude of industries will be watching this closely for its success and whether it can withstand the enormous import and export operation the UK runs.