Written evidence submitted by Professor Tim Lang, Professor Erik Millstone and Professor Terry Marsden (BRT0040)

An agricultural and food system provides food security if and only if the resultant food supply is 1) sufficient 2) sustainable 3) safe 4) health-enhancing and 5) equitable. Even before the Brexit Referendum, DEFRA had acknowledged that UK food security might be problematic in several of those respects; more so in the future unless there was action.\textsuperscript{1} \textsuperscript{2} \textsuperscript{3} Since then, there has been sadly little assessment of UK food security, despite calls by the EFRA committee, for example, to create a national Food Security co-ordinator.\textsuperscript{4} As we have outlined at length in our report on a Food Brexit,\textsuperscript{5} unless there is more attention to these matters in the Post-Brexit trade negotiations, there is a risk that UK food security could be affected across all five of the factors listed above.

Her Majesty’s Government’s (HMG) approach to Brexit and post-Brexit trade agreements is still lacking in detail – which we find astonishing - but the economic risks are already clear, not least to the livelihoods of the 3.8 million people employed in the UK food sector; this includes the 476,500 employed in farming and primary production.\textsuperscript{6} While some proponents of Brexit are clear that they want disruption of the status quo, our fear is that unless there is a rapid growth of public discussion about its implications for food, the UK could all too easily sleepwalk into a food supply and safety crisis. Not only have ministers not yet set out a plausible scenario for UK food security post-Brexit, they have not even shown that they adequately appreciate the complex range of issues entailed and on which policy decisions are required.

Leaving the EU, the single market and the customs union could all too easily result in:

1. Disruptions to the UK’s food supply. Currently about 31% of UK food is imported from within the EU. These are already affected by the fall in the value of sterling. (The OECD is already concerned about further devaluation from a hard Brexit.)\textsuperscript{7} Imports, and exports, could become less reliable, unless transitional and longer-term arrangements are established. In a food economy shaped by ‘just-in-time’

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supply chains, HMG is in dereliction of its duty if it imperils such flows. They cannot simply, quickly or easily be replicated from further afield. Unless there are clear guidelines, disruptions are likely. Imports of perishable foods could be delayed by administrative bottlenecks at ports of departure and entry, with consequent deterioration and waste. In April 2017 the British Retail Consortium (BRC) predicted increases of up to 22% for imported foods, and in its Customs Road Map the BRC recently warned of empty spaces on supermarket shelves.

2. Abrupt as well as gradual increases in food prices as a consequence, in part, of increased transaction costs as well as the likely introduction of tariffs. This could seriously undermine UK farming as well as damage the living standards of people on low incomes.

3. Increased food price volatility because, while the Common Agricultural Policy has sheltered the EU from global price volatilities, the likely post-Brexit subsidy regimes (eg narrowly focussed on eco-system services) will not provide UK producers and consumers with the kind of price stability to which they have long become accustomed.

4. Diminishing standards of quality and safety, initially from products imported from countries that have lower food quality and safety standards than the EU & UK, e.g. the USA, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, but subsequently from UK producers too, as they demand ‘level playing fields’.

5. Increasing consumption of foods and drinks high in calories especially in poor households, with growing inequalities in diets, morbidity and life expectancy between income groups and regions.

6. Increasing divergence between the food policies and standards as between Westminster and the Devolved Administrations, with consequent problems for intra-UK trade in agricultural commodities and food products.

On 17 July 2017 we published A Food Brexit: time to get real, in which we highlighted those challenges, and others (e.g. the loss of science and health infrastructure), in greater detail, but also discussed how such adverse impacts could be diminished or avoided. Our report was the first major publicly available review of the ways that leaving the EU could have an impact on UK food and farming. It drew on the available industry and government data, policies and literature on a wide range of issues including production, farming, employment, quality, safety standards and the environment. Since then, realisation of the enormity that Brexit’s disruption might entail is dawning on policy analysts, yet there has been nigh silence on the matter from HMG with no sign of the kind of sorely needed detail yet being made public. We are aware of high level encounters with HMG which have warned of major risks. We firmly believe that the British public ought to be aware of this level of concern.

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11 See Lang, Millstone & Marsden, op cit
We recommended that careful attention is paid to:

- Food supply security and the arrangements necessary to ensure security and continuity of the UK’s food supply. The UK currently imports large amounts of food from Continental EU Member States. It is not clear that those supplies could readily be replaced by similar products from non-EU countries, as their supplies may be unreliable in terms of quantity, price, quality and safety or even not available at all.
- The likely impact of Brexit on food prices, and on price volatilities.
- Threats to food quality and safety standards throughout supply chains. The standards that currently apply have been negotiated by the UK and other EU Member States at the EU level, but standards of imports from non-EU countries may well be significantly lower than prevailing EU and UK standards. Our report gave examples of this problem; there are many others.
- The future viability of British farms once the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is replaced. HMG has indicated an intention to abolish all Pillar 1 subsidies and retaining only Pillar 2 – for ecosystems services, but Pillar 1 has contributed to stabilising supplies, which have served to diminish price volatility given supply variability and the notorious price inelasticity of demand for staple foods. Environmental protection is not the only ‘public good’, supply and price stability are also essential ‘public goods’.
- Food labour. 35% of food manufacturing labour is from the EU; more in parts of catering and horticulture. Despite a chorus of complaints from farmers, packers, graders, processors and the catering trade, no clarity on labour mobility or availability has been forthcoming. ‘We will take full control of our borders’ is too vague, and not a basis sustained investment nor food supply.
- WTO membership. Currently, the UK is only a member of the WTO by virtue of its membership of the EU. Once the UK leaves the EU it is not yet clear if (a) it will cease to be a WTO member, and will then need to apply for membership, or (2) ‘drop’ into WTO membership by some as yet unspecified speedy mechanism. Even relatively straightforward and successful applications to join the WTO have taken about 5 years. It would be unrealistic to assume that, post-Brexit, the UK will have the rights, responsibilities and protections afforded by WTO membership. To our knowledge, there is no evidence that this problem has been recognised by HMG or that steps have been taken to open a new channel of communication with the WTO. This deserves scrutiny and clarification.

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12 e.g. Food & Drink Federation (2016). A new UK-EU relationship: priorities for the food and drink manufacturing industry. London: FDF, July
13 e.g. British Summer Fruits (2017). How Brexit could crush our Soft Fruit Industry, & the implications for food prices, the nation’s health, the economy & food security. London: BSF