House of Commons Science & Technology Committee Inquiry: Brexit, Science and Innovation: Preparations for 'No-Deal'

Submission by the Society for Applied Microbiology

Introduction

1. The Society for Applied Microbiology (SfAM) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee's call for evidence. SfAM intends for this document to be viewed as complementary to the evidence submitted by the Royal Society of Biology (RSB), which the Society fully supports.

2. A 'no-deal' EU exit will impact on many microbiology-relevant topics of concern to public and environmental health including disease outbreaks, antimicrobial resistance and biosecurity. Nevertheless, **this submission focuses on issues relevant to food safety**, which are a particular concern for the Society.

3. In July 2018 the Society explored the topic of EU exit and food safety science during an expert roundtable discussion.[1] A number of concerns from this meeting were shared with the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and informed the Society's response to the House of Lords EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee inquiry: *Brexit: plant and animal biosecurity*.[2]

Government preparedness

4. In December 2018 the UK Government published its only article of guidance on the safety of food and feed in a no-deal scenario.[3] The guidance in part focuses on food risk assessment (where hazards are identified and assessed from a scientific perspective) which is currently coordinated by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). In preparation for EU Exit, the FSA has boosted its capacity to conduct its own food safety risk assessments, in effect replicating the current EFSA model**. It is crucial that food safety decisions continue to be informed by robust scientific evidence in an open, transparent manner. The FSA's preparations have been a positive development in this respect.**

5. **However, the UK Government guidance does not indicate how data on foodborne disease risks and outbreaks will be monitored and exchanged with neighbouring countries.** Public health officials in the UK rely on pan-EU data sharing systems such as the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF), which alert authorities when food safety threats are detected in neighbouring countries.

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[1] Our report on *Food safety after Brexit* is accessible online: https://sfam.org.uk/resources/science-policy-report-food-safety-brexit.html

[2] House of Lords European Union Committee, *Brexit: plant and animal biosecurity*, October 2018.

[3] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safety-of-food-and-animal-feed-if-theres-no-brexit-deal/food-and-feed-safety-risk-assessment-and-management-if-theres-no-brexit-deal (accessed 18-01-2019)

- In the event of no-deal, the UK will cease to participate in such networks and would have to re-join as a non-EU Member State or have a suitable alternative ready for 29 March.
- As highlighted by the House of Lords EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee: "*We urge the Government therefore to seek continued participation in EU disease notification systems. Detailed provision also needs to be made for how the UK could maintain its biosecurity without full access to these systems. With only months to go before the UK leaves the EU, it is concerning that these provisions are not already in place*."[2]

Food safety science funding

6. Food science experts in the UK have told the Society that the EU is an important source of food safety research funding, through agency grants (e.g. EFSA) and the Horizon 2020 programme. For example, between 2009 and 2016, UK beneficiaries received 23% of the total grant funding supplied by EFSA.[4] If the UK departs the EU with no agreed future arrangements, scientists in the UK will lose access to these crucial sources of research funding. **As part of no-deal preparations, the UK Government should assess how food safety (and other research topics) have benefitted from EU funding and set out suitable UK-based alternatives where there are none.**
7. The Society has also received concerns from scientists working in government agencies, who have participated in Horizon 2020-funded research projects. They are concerned that an inability to participate in future EU research programmes will leave a funding gap that cannot be filled, exacerbated by the fact that government laboratories are ineligible to apply for UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) funding to lead research projects.[5] **The UK Government should ensure that exiting the EU with no deal will not restrict scientists in government agencies from accessing adequate research funding.**

Skills gaps

8. **Access to international talent is crucial for the UK's ability to maintain a thriving science and engineering sector. In December 2018 the UK Government published a policy paper on the rights of EU citizens in the UK in the event of a no-deal Brexit.[6] However, uncertainty remains over what immigration rules will be in place for EU nationals arriving in the UK after 29 March 2019. The UK**

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[4] European Food Safety Authority, *Update on BREXIT activities at EFSA*, December 2017.
[5] Government laboratories can receive funding from government departments and agencies (e.g. Defra and the FSA). However this occurs through a tendering process on pre-defined questions. In other words, scientists in government laboratories may not be able to drive forward their own research.
[6] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/policy-paper-on-citizens-rights-in-the-event-of-a-no-deal-brexit (accessed 18-01-2019)

Government and Parliament must seek continued engagement with the science and engineering community to ensure that the UK's future immigration system does not hinder the flow of expertise and talent to the UK.[7]

9. *Food microbiology*: Experts at our July 2018 roundtable indicated that food microbiology skills in the UK are at risk, voicing concerns that the recruitment of students into food science degrees and PhD studies is in decline. A drop in skilled food scientists and students migrating to the UK after EU exit may further exacerbate skills gaps. This is a very real possibility, given recent reports that EU student numbers in the UK are in decline.[8]

10. *Veterinarians*: The UK draws heavily upon an international pool of qualified veterinarians who help keep our food safe by investigating animal health and welfare standards. The potential for Brexit to result in a shortage of vets has been well reported.[9] For example, as many as 95% of Official Veterinarians overseeing abattoirs in the UK graduated overseas; many of these vets are non-UK EU graduates.[10]

About the Society for Applied Microbiology

The Society for Applied Microbiology (SfAM) is the oldest microbiology society in the UK, representing a global scientific community that is passionate about the application of microbiology for the benefit of the public. Our members work to address issues involving the environment, human and animal health, agriculture and industry.

www.sfam.org.uk

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[7] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-uks-future-skills-based-immigration-system (accessed 18-01-2019)
[8] https://russellgroup.ac.uk/news/fall-in-eu-student-numbers/ (accessed 18-01-2019)
[9] House of Lords European Union Committee, *Brexit: farm animal welfare*, July 2017, session 2017-19, p20.
[10] British Veterinary Association, *Brexit & the veterinary profession*, May 2017, p24.