



National Audit Office

NEWS RELEASE

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Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

Government must engage more with households, communities and industry to strengthen food supply chain resilience to shocks

- Defra believes it may have to intervene more in future to help businesses manage and respond to increasingly likely and severe food supply chain disruptions, such as extreme weather events and cyber-attacks.
- Defra has taken some steps to improve its preparedness, but it has not done enough in recent years to engage critical stakeholders, including households, communities and industry, in its efforts to strengthen resilience to disruptions.
- “Defra should learn from approaches taken in other countries, and strengthen preparedness for emergencies by testing plans with local government and industry,” says head of the NAO.

The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) must work more closely with households, communities and industry to ensure the food supply chain can withstand increasingly likely and severe shocks including extreme weather events, cyber-attacks and disease outbreaks, according to a new National Audit Office (NAO) report.^{1,2,3,4}

The government has designated food as one of 13 Critical National Infrastructure (CNI) sectors that it considers essential for the country to function properly.⁵

During recent disruptions, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, private sector businesses have succeeded in keeping the food supply chain running, in most cases without the need for significant government assistance.⁶

But short- and long-term risks that could significantly affect the food supply chain are becoming more likely and potentially more severe. For example, climate change is increasing the likelihood of extreme weather events. As a result, Defra is less confident about the private sector’s ability to withstand such shocks without greater government intervention.

Defra has taken some positive steps to improve its preparedness for food supply disruptions, such as expanding its Food Supply Chain Resilience team and increasing its focus on planning for catastrophic events where food supply would be seriously affected.

However, it has done too little in recent years to encourage businesses, households and communities to strengthen resilience and prepare for potential food shortages caused by disruption to the food supply chain. UK households are less prepared for emergencies compared with several other countries, according to government research.⁷

While food supply chain businesses praised how Defra engaged with them during the COVID-19 pandemic, they told the independent public spending watchdog that it has done so less frequently since then. These businesses also had limited input in the development of Defra's 'playbook' for responding to food supply disruptions, creating a risk that plans may not work in practice.

Scenario exercises that test Defra's preparedness for catastrophic events that would severely disrupt food supply – the last national exercise took place in 2023 – have also largely excluded food supply chain businesses, with some indicating that they would welcome inclusion in future exercises.⁸

Meanwhile, local resilience forums have indicated that they lack clarity from Defra on what is expected of them in the event of disruption.⁹

Defra also needs to contend with wider structural issues, the NAO report says. Despite participating in several cross-government working groups and boards, Defra stated in 2025 that it had very little confidence that cross-government work to build resilience was sufficiently joined-up. Defra also lacks the legal powers it may need during a catastrophic event to maintain food supply, such as the power to direct businesses to take emergency action.

Defra can further improve resilience by learning from approaches used in other CNIs sectors and in other countries.

To strengthen the food supply chain's resilience to disruptions, the NAO recommends that Defra:

- refreshes its approach to engaging with food supply chain businesses
- assesses the potential costs and benefits of approaches used to build resilience in other sectors or countries and whether they are wholly or partly applicable to the UK's food supply chain
- reviews its response plans to ensure they would be effective in practice
- reviews the current legal powers it could use to respond to a catastrophic event that causes a severe food supply disruption
- works with Cabinet Office to ensure that future initiatives to encourage greater preparedness by households and communities include appropriate detail on food preparedness

Gareth Davies, head of the NAO, said:

"Recent disruptions have shown the resilience of the UK's food supply chain, but risks are increasing in likelihood and severity."

“Defra should learn from approaches taken in other countries, and strengthen preparedness for emergencies by testing plans with local government and industry.”

ENDS

Notes for Editors

1. The report will be available on the NAO website via the following link from 00:01 Friday 4 September: <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/resilience-of-the-food-supply-chain-to-disruptions/>
2. Rich Sullivan-Jones (Director, NAO Value for Money audits on Defra) and Helen Roberts (Senior Audit Manager, NAO Value for Money audits on Defra) will be appearing in a live webinar hosted by the Cold Chain Federation on Friday 4 September to discuss the report's key findings and recommendations. The webinar is open to the public – to register your attendance, please visit the following webpage: <https://register.gotowebinar.com/register/8561287273998542432>
3. This report does not cover the resilience or sustainability of domestic food production. Domestic food production is a vital part of the food supply chain, with concerns in recent years about profitability, resilience to long-term risks like climate change and anti-microbial resistance, and competing land use pressures. The NAO intends to examine the resilience of domestic food production in future work.
4. Defra is the lead government department responsible for security of food supply, while the Food Standards Agency has lead responsibility for food safety and public health standards. The Cabinet Office leads on cross-government CNI policy, with local authorities and local resilience forums playing an important role in responding to emergencies at a local level across a range of different risks, including those affecting food supply.
5. For more information on the 13 CNI sectors, see the following webpage: <https://www.npsa.gov.uk/about-npsa/critical-national-infrastructure>
6. The food supply chain covers all stages from food production to consumption and includes agriculture, manufacturing, storage and distribution, wholesale, retail and catering. It is complex and highly interconnected, with goods often moving through multiple stages and locations before reaching consumers. The system is primarily industry-led, and businesses are responsible for managing their own operations and resilience to disruptions.
7. In 2024, the Cabinet Office launched the government's 'Prepare' website to improve public preparedness for food supply disruptions. However, its 2025 survey found that 51% of respondents said their household was slightly or not at all prepared for an emergency. While 75% of respondents had not seen or heard emergency preparedness advice in the past year, 66% said they had non-perishable food (that did not require cooking) that would last their household approximately three days. Recent comparative analysis by the Cabinet Office of a range of UK and European population preparedness surveys highlights that, compared with several other countries, UK households are less prepared for emergencies, and government-led messaging to households on preparing for emergencies is less prominent. Figure 9 in the report provides examples of approaches taken by other countries to strengthen food supply chain resilience.
8. The government's National Risk Register highlights several risks that, while considered low in likelihood, could cause catastrophic disruption (the highest impact category) if they occurred, and result in food shortages because of a failure

of the food supply chain. Examples of these risks include a national power outage, pandemic, nuclear accident, or large-scale chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear attack.

9. Local resilience forums (LRFs) are multi-agency partnerships involving emergency services, local authorities, the NHS, the Environment Agency and others. The 38 LRFs in England are responsible for planning for, and responding to, a range of localised incidents and catastrophic emergencies across the full range of National Risk Register risks. This includes those that may affect food supply. The 2022 UK Government Resilience Framework highlighted the importance of strengthening LRFs.

About the NAO

The National Audit Office (NAO) scrutinises public spending for Parliament and is independent of government and the civil service. It helps Parliament hold government to account and it uses its insights to help people who manage and govern public bodies improve public services.

The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), Gareth Davies, is an Officer of the House of Commons and leads the NAO. The NAO audits the financial accounts of departments and other public bodies. It also examines and reports on the value for money of how public money has been spent.

In 2025-26, the NAO's work led to a positive financial impact through reduced costs, improved service delivery, or other benefits to citizens, of £2.6 billion. This represents around £24 for every pound of our net expenditure, exceeding our target of £15 for every pound spent.

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