

No-deal Brexit: the biggest test yet for UK crisis management?



*How should the government prepare for a no-deal Brexit? Until now, DExEU has been reluctant to communicate its activities to the public. **John Connolly (University of the West of Scotland)** and **Andrew Judge (University of Glasgow)** explain why co-ordinated planning across government departments, and clear communication with the public, are vital.*

The news that the UK and EU are stepping up their preparations for a 'no deal' Brexit has attracted predictable responses from Remainers and Brexiteers. Most Remainers view the decision as a belated vindication of their worst fears about leaving the EU. Brexiteers are somewhat more divided. Some consider the European Commission's decision to issue guidance documents as the [latest manifestation of Project Fear](#). Others, such as Jacob Rees-Mogg, have long called for the UK to make similar preparations to demonstrate to the EU that the UK is serious about preferring 'no deal' over a 'bad deal', as the Prime Minister affirmed in her [Lancaster House speech](#).



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While somewhat overstated, these fears shouldn't be ignored. The identification of risks and the development plans to mitigate them are inherently political choices. Moreover, contingency plans are in some senses '[fantasy documents](#)' which serve as "rationality badges, symbols [that] organisations use to signal they are in control of danger, whether they really are or not".

Nonetheless, the announcement that plans are being put in place should still be welcomed as sensible and prudent under such uncertain circumstances. Regardless of your views on Brexit, it is becoming increasingly likely (but not inevitable) that the UK will leave the EU without a withdrawal agreement. It is also hard to dispute that such an outcome would have a [range of immediately negative consequences](#) for both the UK and EU on the first day of 'taking back control'. It would be wholly irresponsible of the UK, European Commission and EU27 governments to *not* plan for such eventualities.

We should perhaps be reassured by the recent statement from the acting Cabinet Secretary, Sir Mark Sedwill, to the [Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee](#) on 19 July:

“We have confidence in our ‘no deal’ planning [...] and we have a whole range of mechanisms, some of them designed over many years for different circumstances that we can apply, should that be the case, against a range of no deal scenarios. I wouldn’t want any of our partners to think that we won’t be ready for it”.

The mechanisms he refers are likely to be of two broad types. The first are the contingency plans which the UK already has in place for managing crises across different policy areas such as health, energy and environmental policy. These plans take many forms, but they typically outline the range of actions that need to be taken and allocate roles and responsibilities for coordination, implementation and communication functions during a crisis. While Brexit is not an eventuality that is explicitly planned for within these plans, they nonetheless set out a framework for dealing with unforeseen and extreme circumstances.

The second mechanism are the new contingency plans which the UK will have to develop to address the particular challenges that are likely to emerge from a ‘no deal’ Brexit such as delays at customs, uncertainties about regulations over data sharing and so on.

Unfortunately, not everyone shares Sir Mark’s confidence. At the same Select Committee meeting the chief executive of the Civil Service, John Manzoni, stressed that although contingency plans are being put in place, “[not everything will be perfect](#)” if a ‘no deal’ scenario occurs. The response of Hilary Benn, the chair of the Brexit Select Committee, to a question put to him on the [Today programme](#) about the preparedness of government departments is even less reassuring. He stated that ‘we just don’t know’ whether government is ready to manage such a scenario, and that he felt that the Prime Minister’s appearance before the Liaison Committee the day before did not provide nearly enough clarity about this.

These are two main ways of interpreting these competing statements. It may be that the committee is not aware of whether the Department for Exiting the European Union (DExEU) is undertaking sufficient contingency planning. Since DExEU has reportedly been designated as the lead department for coordinating the contingency planning of all departments, this is rather concerning. On the other hand, a lack of preparedness also speaks to a fundamental truth about a ‘no deal’ scenario: we are entering totally uncharted territory. While the main risks can be identified and planned for in advance, there are major uncertainties about unforeseen risks and how different risks may interact with each other. While contingency planning is always challenging, it is especially difficult in this kind of extreme situation and represents the single greatest test of the UK’s crisis management capabilities to date.

So how should the government prepare for ‘no deal’? In our view, there are two key areas that the government needs to focus on in the months ahead.

The first is to develop robust mechanisms for the *coordination* of crisis response. In most pre-existing contingency plans (the first mechanism discussed above) there is a system of response escalation. The relevant department (e.g. Health, BEIS) typically takes the lead role in the first instance, and works with the Civil Contingencies Secretariat in the Cabinet Office as required. In the most extreme circumstances that require a political response, crises are typically elevated to the Cabinet Office (the infamous COBRA). This segregation of response could mean that many parts of a ‘no deal’ scenario could be managed by different parts of government, thereby preventing the Cabinet Office being overstretched.

It does, however, raise the question of whether coordination between COBRA and different departments will be sufficient if our worst fears are realised on day one of Brexit. For instance, if customs problems lead to shortages in key goods such as medicines, food and energy, how will these intersecting problems be managed? What are the current capacities for ensuring an effective cross-sectoral crisis response in such unprecedented circumstances? What happens if the UK faces crises unrelated to Brexit at the same time, such as severe flooding or terrorist attacks? Can there be effective crisis management leadership if there is a simultaneous political crisis within the governing Conservative party? These worst-case-scenarios, *as unlikely as they may be*, should factor into any sensible contingency planning.

The second, which is closely related to coordination, is effective communication. Throughout the negotiation process, DExEU has been quite reluctant to communicate what it is doing to either the public or Parliament. This is understandable considering its role in negotiating with the European Commission, but in its new additional role of coordinating contingency planning it needs to recognise that a key task of crisis preparations is *communication*. Effective communication is important for providing reassurance to the public and ensuring that households and businesses are well prepared in order to minimise the negative consequences of a 'no deal' scenario. The government's commitment to produce and circulate 70 'technical papers' for the public and businesses is to be welcomed, but it is important that these are communicated in a timely manner and that they contain useful information about what is and is not required. This is vital for reassuring the public and avoiding the kind of alarmist statements that have appeared in the media in recent days and any accusations that they are simply 'fantasy documents'.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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