

Plausible future scenarios

A set of four narrative scenarios produced for the online workshop, incorporating qualitative data gathered through survey and interview responses describing possible future disruptions that could impact the supply chain.

It is July 2026. An unseasonably hot summer drought is in full force across England, with temperatures exceeding 35 degrees for several weeks on end. Livestock are suffering, with heat stress and cattle deaths reported. In East Anglia, summer droughts are already impacting yields of key vegetables, when disaster strikes. A series of wildfires break out across the region, lasting for several weeks and decimating farmland and forest. Large numbers of residents are evacuated to surrounding regions, resulting in the closure of schools, businesses, and parts of both the A14 and A120.

It is December 2026. Several years of unseasonal rains have caused problems in India, with the emergence of pests at critical times for spice harvests, and decimating harvests year on year. It is clear that this is a new normal and an impact of climate change, and in recent years the Indian government has had to limit exports of some agricultural products to prioritise domestic food security. In response to this, farmers are encouraged to move away from growing spices for export, in favour of growing rice and legumes for a growing domestic market. Unfortunately, a similar situation is starting to evolve in China, with low rainfall year on year in parts of the country usually producing crops for export.

It is 2040. The emergence of a new strain of avian flu in geese in South America has spread to parts of North America and Asia, where it has jumped to start to infect people. Not yet fully understanding the potential impact of the new strain of flu, some countries are very quick to respond, imposing strict lockdowns and social distancing, as well as large-scale poultry culling. This results in a global downturn similar to the one in 2020. After nine months, research shows that while the new strain is deadly in birds, people are mildly affected, and so the emphasis shifts to limiting the spread by putting in very strict rules for poultry farming including size of operation, strict welfare standards, medical checks and vaccines, as well as culling wild birds. This results in some businesses having to close for good.

It is 2040. The last 20 years have been challenging for British farmers, with declining yields in key crops due to climate change, biodiversity loss and the emergence of new pests and diseases in oil crops and vegetables. The vast majority of farmers have implemented environmental protections on their farms in line with new policy directives, and in some cases the steady income from the sustainable farming incentive (SFI) and other payments, plus diversifying with other income streams such as tourism and agroforestry, has meant some farmers are shifting away from a narrow focus on growing seasonal food that is often impacted by environmental disruption and is no longer able to give them the return on investment that they need.