

# The Northern Ireland Consumer Perspective



An overview: Early perceptions and experiences of EU Exit

September 2021



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## 1. Executive Summary

1.1 EU Exit has placed Northern Ireland (NI) consumers in a unique position. NI is the only part of the UK that shares a land border with the EU and special arrangements have been put in place through the NI Protocol to reflect this. This means NI consumers will have a unique early experience of the post-EU environment.

1.2 This report outlines the perceived and real impact of EU Exit on consumers across NI. In doing so, it brings together and outlines the key findings from three independently commissioned research studies which explore the early NI consumer experience from January to March 2021. The studies were:

- An online representative survey with 1,000 consumers to understand their perceptions and early experiences of EU Exit;
- A separate online survey with 1,004 consumers to understand the impact of EU Exit on consumer parcel deliveries; and

- Qualitative research consisting of 11 focus groups across NI to explore in more detail EU Exit's impact on NI consumers.

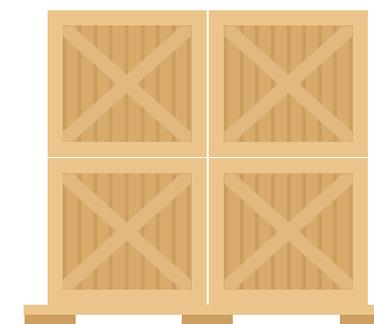
1.3 The report identifies key consumer concerns and how consumers feel their consumer rights have been affected. It also discusses consumers' perceptions and early experience in relation to food, energy, travel, digital services, parcels and online shopping.

1.4 The key findings show:

- consumers are mostly concerned about price increases across various markets;
- almost one-quarter (23%) will have to make cuts elsewhere in their budget and more than one in ten (13%) will struggle with their finances in response to price increases;
- consumers are confused about their consumer rights and whether they are less well (32%) or better protected (10%) now;
- two thirds (66%) are experiencing an increase in the cost of supermarket goods and a similar proportion (68%) have seen a reduction in choice as certain goods are no longer available;
- many consumers are concerned about future travel including queuing at passport control (52%), customs checks (52%) and getting medical treatment abroad (48%);

- more than two in five (41%) are worried about incurring roaming charges, especially if they live in border communities;
- around one in four are experiencing delivery delays when they send parcels to GB (28%) and RoI (24%), and more than one in five have noticed an increase in prices when they send parcels to GB (22%) and RoI (21%); and
- over two thirds (68%) are facing problems with UK online retailers saying they no longer deliver to NI and nearly half (48%) have had the same issue with EU online retailers.

1.5 This insight into NI consumers' early perceptions and experience of EU Exit creates an opportunity for the UK Government and the EU to put NI consumers at the centre of discussions and decision making. They must make the right decisions for NI consumers which address the emerging issues our research has identified, and make sure they avoid creating conditions that will result in future consumer detriment across NI.



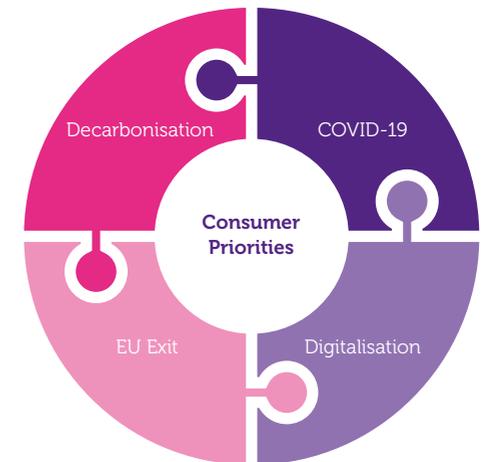
## 2. Who we are

- 2.1 We are the consumer representative body for Northern Ireland (NI) responsible for championing consumer interests, and we put them at the heart of everything we do. We are passionate about ensuring that others do the same so that markets, legislation and regulation work effectively for consumers across NI.
- 2.2 We are an insight-led evidence based organisation:
- providing consumers with expert advice and confidential guidance;
  - engaging with government, regulators and consumer bodies to influence public policy;
  - empowering consumers with the information and tools to build confidence and knowledge;
  - investigating and resolving consumer complaints under statutory and non-statutory functions;
  - undertaking best practice research to identify and quantify emerging risks to consumers; and
  - campaigning for market reform as an advocate for consumer choice and protection.
- 2.3 We have specific statutory functions in energy, postal services, transport, water and sewerage, and food affordability and accessibility. We also educate and empower consumers against unfair or discriminatory practices in any market including financial services and private car parks. Across both our statutory and non-statutory areas, we pay particular regard to consumers:
- who are disabled or have long-term health conditions;
  - who are of pensionable age;
  - who are on low incomes; and
  - who live in rural areas.

## 3. Consumer priorities and the NI consumer position

### Consumer priorities

- 3.1 The strategic consumer landscape has changed significantly over the last year. COVID-19 and EU Exit have and will continue to impact consumers. Additionally, decarbonisation will have a profound impact on consumers for many years to come. Lastly, there is greater emphasis on digitalisation that will change how consumers interact across various markets. In all these strategic areas, consumers across NI must not be left behind and now is the time to make sure this does not happen.
- 3.2 These four areas represent our consumer priorities - COVID-19, EU Exit, decarbonisation and digitalisation – and will be our focus over the next number of years. It is vital that NI consumers are adequately represented and protected to ensure markets, legislation, regulation and policy effectively prevent consumer detriment. This is essential. When detriment does happen, there must be swift intervention by the responsible authorities in the relevant markets.



### The NI consumer position

- 3.3 It is important government, markets, regulators, service providers and policy makers are aware of and take account of how NI consumers differ from the average UK consumer. For instance:

- more NI consumers live in rural areas, over double compared to the UK;
- in comparison to the UK average, we have more consumers with a disability and that rely on government support;
- more consumers in NI are economically inactive compared to the UK;
- NI consumers already have the lowest levels of disposable income across the UK; and
- NI consumers make up just 3% of the UK population so at the outset there is the risk that UK led legislation, regulation and markets may not fully meet NI consumer needs.

3.4 These indicators help to demonstrate that consumers in NI are more vulnerable and are at greater risk of consumer harm. This must be the starting point for all those involved in shaping how markets work for NI consumers.

### NI compared to the UK

Population	NI	UK
Total Population	1,895,500	67,081,200
Working age (16 - 64)	1,179,700	41,845,000
	NI	UK
Pensionable Age*	16%	18.6%
Rural Population	35%**	17%***
Low income	17%	17%

**NI 11.6%**  
**UK 5.7%**

**Disability Claimants (DLA or PIP)**

Source: NOMIS 2020.

Employment Status	NI	UK
Unemployed	31,000 <b>(3.6%)</b>	67,081,200 <b>(3.6%)</b>
Economically active	876,000 <b>(73%)</b>	33,817,000 <b>(79%)</b>
<b>Economically inactive</b>	<b>315,000 (27.1%)</b>	<b>8,806,000 (21.3%)</b>

Source: Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics, Mar-May 2021.

NI makes up **3%** of the UK population



Over one third of the NI population live in rural areas



Sources: \* NISRA and ONS mid-2020 | \*\* NISRA, 2018 | \*\*\*England Only, ONS, 2018

Source: ASDA Income Tracker, March 2021.



## 6. Methodology

6.1 The Consumer Council commissioned three separate independent studies that took place in March and April 2021.

6.2 The overarching purpose of this research programme was to obtain insight from consumers on their early perceptions and experiences of EU Exit. Our approach is outlined below:

### Quantitative research

6.3 In March 2021, Social Market Research (SMR) carried out an online representative survey with 1,000 consumers to understand their perceptions and early experiences of EU Exit. This covered general consumer concerns and issues in relation to food, energy, travel, digital, postal services and online shopping.

6.4 Also in March 2021, SMR carried out a separate survey with 1,004 consumers to understand the impact of EU Exit on consumer parcel deliveries. Previous research by the Consumer Council highlighted potential issues around parcel deliveries so we decided this study would add value by providing greater insight into the consumer experience now we have left the EU<sup>1</sup>.

6.5 The key findings from the quantitative studies presented in this report are statistically significant and representative of the NI population.

### Qualitative research

6.6 To complement the quantitative studies, during March and April 2021, Ipsos MORI undertook 11 focus groups across NI to explore in more detail EU Exit's impact on NI consumers. Each focus group consisted of 10 consumers.

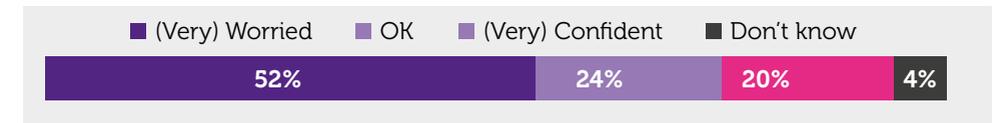
**Please note that these studies took place during the COVID-19 pandemic in March and April 2021. Therefore some consumers experienced difficulty differentiating the extent to which their experiences were due to EU Exit, COVID-19 or a combination of both.**

## 7. Consumer concerns, impact of price increases and consumer rights

### Consumer concerns

7.1 A significant proportion of the consumers surveyed expressed concern about coming out of EU Exit transition period. Our research shows that over half (52%) say they are either 'worried' or 'very worried' now that we have left the EU (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: How NI consumers feel now that we have left the EU**



7.2 Our findings also identify where consumers have most concerns. The list of consumer concerns in rank order are<sup>2</sup>:

- 1) price increases;
- 2) the NI economy;
- 3) maintaining a frictionless border with the Republic of Ireland;
- 4) reduction of choice of retailers/products available in NI;
- 5) introduction of tariffs on goods sourced from outside NI;
- 6) introduction of customs checks;
- 7) longer delivery times;
- 8) reduction in quality of food standards;
- 9) reduction in product safety standards; and
- 10) reduction of consumer protections.

**Question:** As a Northern Ireland consumer, how do you feel now that we have left the EU?

**Base size:** 1,000

**Source:** Social Market Research (SMR), Real and Perceived Impacts of EU Exit for Northern Ireland Consumers, March 2021

1. [https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-09/EX\\_Exit\\_Online\\_Shopping\\_and\\_Parcel\\_Deliveries\\_for\\_Consumers\\_in\\_Northern\\_Ireland.pdf](https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-09/EX_Exit_Online_Shopping_and_Parcel_Deliveries_for_Consumers_in_Northern_Ireland.pdf)

2. 1,000 NI consumers were presented with a list of often discussed EU Exit consumer matters and asked to rank their top three concerns.

## Price increases

- 7.3 The top area of concern is price increases. Our focus groups help to illustrate the impact of price increases which indicates why this is at the forefront of their minds. One consumer told us:

"I suppose price rises are never celebrated as a consumer but if the basics increased it would reduce any disposable income for anything else so I'd imagine people will be forced to cut back on both the essentials and non-essentials, having a big impact on businesses, leisure and recreation."

- 7.4 Alongside this, we must consider how those living in low income households will be affected. Consumers that took part in the focus groups make this point highlighting the disproportionate impact price increases would have on low income consumers. This impact would be compounded by the loss of income and increase in household bills as part of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 7.5 Our research also asked consumers if prices did rise following EU Exit, how this would affect them. More than one in four (27%) told us they would be able to absorb price increases. However, more than one in ten (13%) say they would need to do without.

## Impact of prices increases



**27%** Would be able to absorb these price increases (within reason)



**32%** Said it would place some strain on finances



**23%** Would have to make cuts elsewhere in household spend



**13%** Would need to do without

**Question:** If prices in general were to rise following our exit from the EU, what impact would this have on your finances?

**Base size:** 1,000

**Source:** Social Market Research (SMR), Real and Perceived Impacts of EU Exit for Northern Ireland Consumers, March 2021

- 7.6 This point is reinforced by a consumer that took part in the focus groups who told us:

"I'm a single mother, who has to manage my finances very carefully and this could affect me a lot."

- 7.7 These findings are further evidence as to why price increases are the top concern for consumers across NI. It is clear increasing prices will reduce consumers' financial resilience particularly if they experience a reduction in the amount of income they receive. Additionally, this risk has the potential to cause greater consumer harm in NI, as NI averages less household discretionary income (£103 each week) compared to the UK<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, the vulnerability of NI consumers and their financial resilience is of particular concern.
- 7.8 Clearly, price increases and how they impact NI consumers will require close monitoring.

## Consumer Rights

- 7.9 Consumers require a better understanding of their consumer rights now the UK has left the EU. Our research shows there is a significant proportion (32%) of NI consumers that feel EU Exit will leave them less well protected by negatively impacting their consumer rights. A similar proportion (31%) feel their rights will remain unchanged and more than one in four (27%) did not know how their rights would be affected (Figure 2). This indicates there is confusion among consumers.
- 7.10 Consumers will need support to ensure they are aware of their rights so that they feel empowered to challenge poor quality of service from service providers across all consumer markets. This is the cornerstone of any market which seeks to work in the consumer interest. The Consumer Council takes an active role in this area, promoting awareness and giving advice to consumers regarding their rights across a number of areas. For instance throughout 2020/21, we helped over 10,000 consumers across NI and returned nearly £1.1million to consumers.

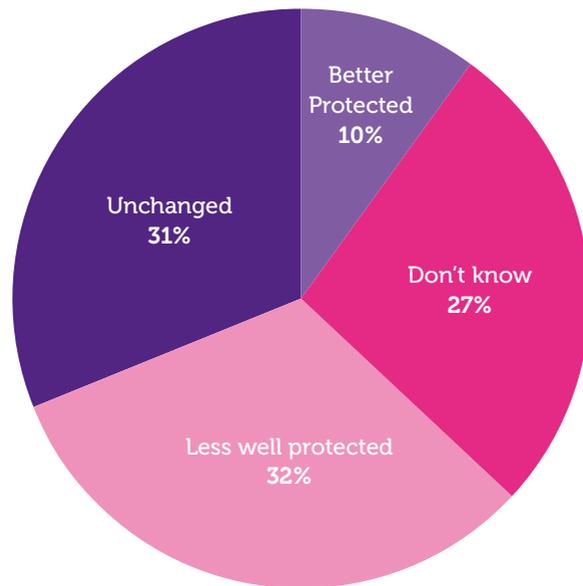
3. ASDA income tracker, March 2021

7.11 Other research by the Consumer Council has found that in 2021 almost a quarter (23%) of consumers experienced a problem when buying goods or services. Of these consumers, 42% also stated that they were unaware of their rights<sup>4</sup>.

7.12 In this context, our research also explored who consumers feel should provide guidance in this area. Most consumers (65%) feel that it helps if a consumer body provides guidance.

7.13 However, service providers also have an important role. For instance, service providers must make it clear what rights exist in their respective area. Equally, policy makers must stress the importance of clarity and transparency from service providers to service users, regarding their consumer rights.

**Figure 2. How consumers feel their consumer rights will be impacted**



**Question:** Having left the EU how do you feel your consumer rights will be impacted?

**Base size:** 1,000

**Source:** Social Market Research (SMR), Real and Perceived Impacts of the EU Exit for Northern Ireland Consumers, March 2021

4. The Consumer Council – Consumer Insights Survey, March 2021

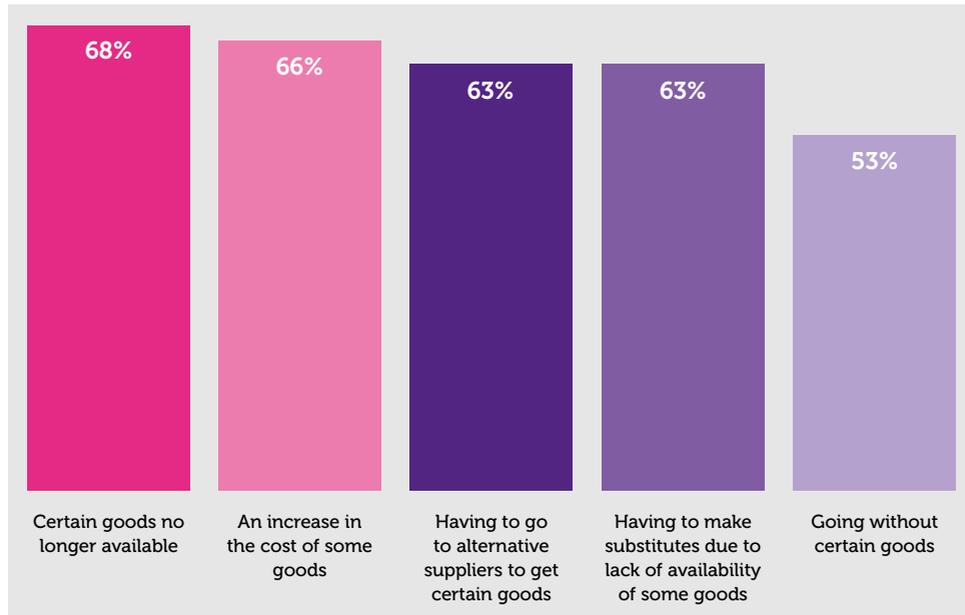
## 8. Food - availability and prices

8.1 Our research provides valuable insight into how consumers feel access to food has been affected by EU Exit. Consumers say they have experienced a reduction in the availability of certain food products and increasing food prices at major supermarket chains and smaller independent stores. Focus group participants illustrate this:

“Like today I went to buy strawberries from [Retailer’s name] – none. They said it was due to deliveries affected by Brexit.”

“Food supplies have been hit. [Retailer’s name] is stocking...another retailers’... products and have empty shelves. Other shops have also been low or out of stock of other food products that are normally abundant.”

8.2 This indicates early signs of a reduction in consumer choice and increasing financial pressure on consumer budgets. Our quantitative findings also help to outline the nature and extent of the issues. For instance, over two thirds (68%) say they experienced certain goods no longer being available and two thirds (66%) say there was an increase in the cost of some goods. This supports the view of those that took part in the focus groups. However, it is important to also draw attention to the fact that over half of consumers (53%) say they have had to do without certain goods (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Consumers' experience of their supermarket shop**

8.3 Again, the focus groups provide further insight with a consumer commenting that:

“Food is a basic human need; it would be dreadful if we had to get to a point where we couldn’t even have food readily available.”

**Question:** Thinking about your supermarket shop, since January have you experienced any of the following which you believe have been caused by leaving the EU (rather than Covid-19)?  
**Base size:** 1,000  
**Source:** Social Market Research (SMR), Real and Perceived Impacts of EU Exit for Northern Ireland Consumers, March 2021

- 8.4 Consumers throughout the research have expressed frustration about food supply issues. If future supply chains of certain foods remains unclear and consumer choice is reduced, price increases are likely to occur.
- 8.5 Despite this, a small number of consumers express a willingness to pay more for food products if it meant that food standards would not be reduced after EU Exit.
- 8.6 However, the majority of consumers would struggle with any food price increases with changes disproportionately affecting low income consumers. These changes would likely force more vulnerable consumers into less healthy eating options or increase dependence on food banks.
- 8.7 For context, research published by Safefood and Food Standards Agency in June 2021<sup>5</sup> found that that low-income families in NI have to spend up to 46% of their weekly income to afford a nutritiously adequate, acceptable and realistic food basket that met their basic needs.
- 8.8 This research also showed that a household with two children (two parents, one primary and one secondary aged child), not in receipt of benefits but earning the National Living Wage would still need to spend just under a third (32%) of their total weekly budget to afford a Minimum Essential Food Basket.
- 8.9 The personal impact of this, and the complexities of food poverty can be seen in a short film produced by the Consumer Council, Hand to Mouth: Accessing a Healthy Affordable Food basket on a low income<sup>6</sup>.
- 8.10 The Consumer Council annual insight survey also found the cost of food/groceries was the second most common worry for low-income consumers (13% vs 7% for all consumers). Indeed, worrying about food costs came above concerns about home energy (11%), rent/mortgage (11%) and credit/loan repayments (8%).
- 8.11 As a number of household expenses are likely to increase in the future, it is vital that food and nutrition are not seen as unaffordable or even as a household luxury. This early consumer experience is a worry and will require close monitoring. It is vital the most vulnerable consumers across NI are protected.

5. Safefood | What is the cost of a healthy food basket in Northern Ireland in 2020?

6. Food Poverty | The Consumer Council

## 9. Energy - perceptions on price, choice and supply

- 9.1 Our research shows consumers have mixed reactions to energy pricing. This was one area where consumers found it difficult to attribute their concerns to EU Exit or COVID-19 and other global factors.
- 9.2 However, our quantitative research does offer insight into how consumers believe EU Exit will impact on future developments in the NI energy market. Over a third (36%) feel that prices will be negatively impacted due to EU Exit, a quarter (25%) believe they will have less choice in energy providers and over one-fifth (22%) believe the security of energy supply will be negatively impacted.
- 9.3 However, the focus groups also show that consumers recognise the effect of market fluctuations and the influence this has on increasing prices regardless of EU Exit.
- 9.4 It is important to highlight that NI consumers are currently experiencing significant energy price increases, which is a significant cause of concern for the Consumer Council. While not related to EU Exit, these increases must be viewed in the wider context of the pressure it puts on household budgets. This will reduce the ability of consumers to cope with any further price increases driven, in part, by EU Exit.

### Top areas where consumers believe EU Exit will have a negative impact on the Energy Market

**36%** Believe EU Exit will have a negative impact on energy prices

**25%** Believe their choice and the availability of energy providers will be negatively impacted

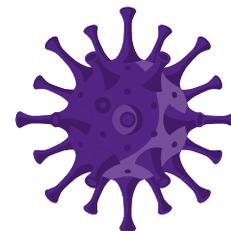
**22%** Believe the security of supply of energy will be negatively impacted by EU Exit

**Question:** In what way, if any, do you think leaving the EU may impact on the following in relation to energy (electricity, gas, home heating oil, petrol) in Northern Ireland?

**Base size:** 1,000

**Source:** Social Market Research (SMR), Real and Perceived Impacts of EU Exit for Northern Ireland Consumers, March 2021.

## Increasing energy prices



# COVID-19 and Global Factors

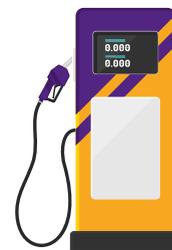
Energy prices  
increasing significantly



Electricity providers have **increased** their prices ranging from **3.9% to 14.9%**

Gas providers **have increased** their prices ranging from

**9.8% to 17.8%**



The price of **petrol** has **increased** by **4.8%**



The price of home heating oil **has increased** by **8.3%** for 300L

**Source:** The Consumer Council - Consumer Council Price Monitoring, March - July 2021

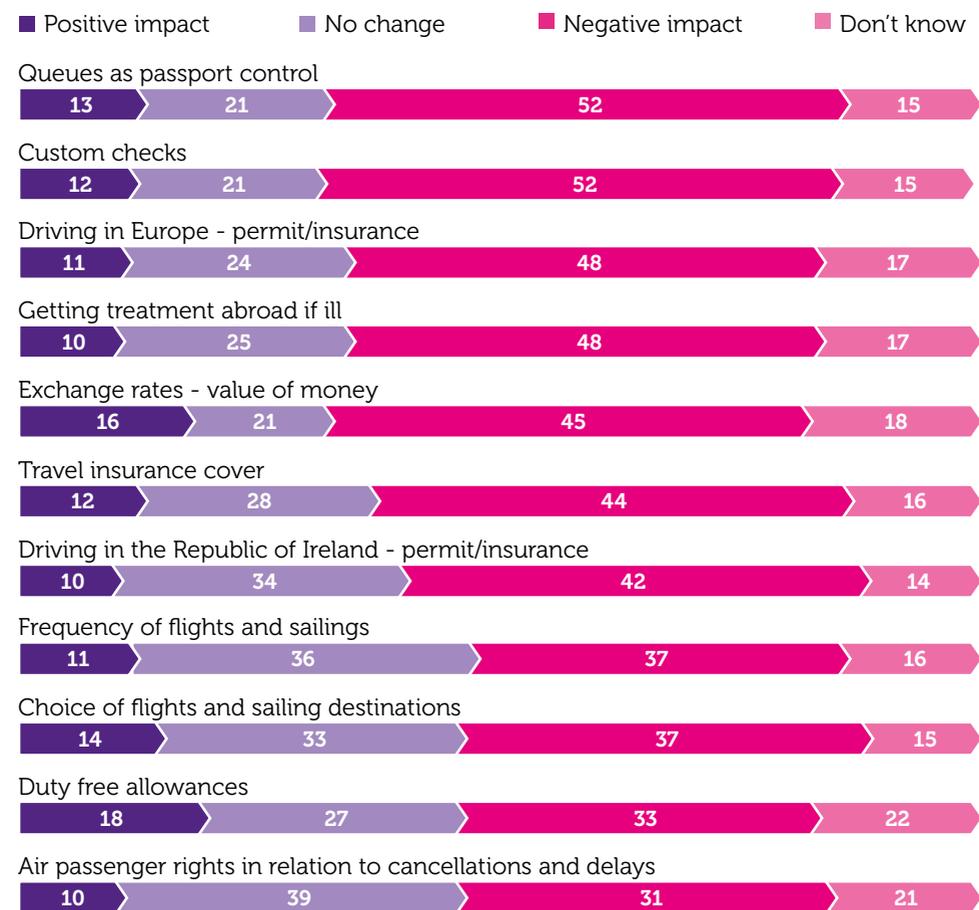
## 10. Travel - travelling and accessing health treatment

10.1 The future of travel post-EU Exit is a concern for NI consumers too. While many consumers do not have direct experience of travel related issues due to COVID-19 within the research, they mainly provided views on their perception about future travel arrangements.

10.2 However, our research does identify where consumers believe

EU Exit will have a negative impact. The top areas they believe will be negatively affected include queuing at passport control (52%), custom checks (52%), driving in Europe (48%) and getting treatment abroad if ill (48%). In almost all aspects of travel, consumers predicted that EU Exit would mainly have a negative impact (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Consumers' views on EU Exit's impact on future travel**



**Question:** What impact, if any, do you think leaving the EU will have on each of the following aspects of travel?

**Base size:** 1,000

**Source:** Social Market Research (SMR), Real and Perceived Impacts of the EU Exit for Northern Ireland Consumers, March 2021



10.3 In response to these beliefs some consumers say they have made arrangements to deal with the negative impact of EU Exit. This includes obtaining an Irish passport (19%) to make future travel easier and requesting/ receiving a green card (28%) for their car insurance. Since this research was completed green cards are no longer required for consumers to travel in the EU. Under an agreement between the Motor Insurance Bureau of Ireland (MIBI) and the EU Commission, motor vehicles may now travel between EU countries without requiring supplementary insurance documentation.

10.4 Our focus groups provide further insight into consumer concerns about getting medical treatment outside of the UK which could have serious consequences. Consumers explained:

"It's going to be more difficult for the people who live in the border areas to access the nearest hospital especially when time critical attention is needed"

"It could end up being quite stressful especially if you find yourself in a foreign country after an accident with little security in terms of medical costs".

10.5 Travel insurance was another key issue for consumers. A significant proportion (44%) are expecting travel insurance cover to be negatively impacted by EU Exit (Figure 4). More specifically, a number of consumers that took part in the focus groups believe travel insurance prices will increase<sup>7</sup>.

10.6 Similar to other avenues of research, increased prices continue to be a source of stress and anxiety for consumers, who will now likely be required to pay extra for medical insurance when travelling or risk their health.

10.7 Given that the COVID-19 pandemic has restricted travel and caused travel disruption, consumers are not able to differentiate COVID-19 travel outcomes from EU Exit related outcomes. Due to this, early EU Exit related travel issues are difficult to determine. Therefore, this research suggests the continued monitoring of the financial costs of travel to the consumer is advised. The impact of EU Exit on travel should also be reassessed post COVID-19.

## 11. Digital services, parcels and online shopping

### Digital services

11.1 Consumers have expressed concerns about how digital services will be affected by EU Exit. For instance, more than four in ten (41%) consumers believe mobile phone charges will be an issue.



**41%** Believe the cost of mobile phone charges will be negatively affected

11.2 Our focus groups provide some further insight and highlights the importance of the potential issue for those consumers living in border areas. Consumers highlighted that those living in border areas, or that have family who do, will be more significantly affected by roaming charges and hope that these charges do not rise.

### Parcels and online shopping

11.3 Consumers are clearer about how EU Exit has affected their experience when sending parcels and when they shop online. Their experience identifies emerging issues that need immediate attention so that consumers are adequately protected from detriment.

11.4 Consumers have identified difficulties when they send parcels to destinations in GB, RoI, EU and the rest of the world. The evidence points to delivery delays and an increase in postage costs when sending parcels to GB and RoI as the key issues.

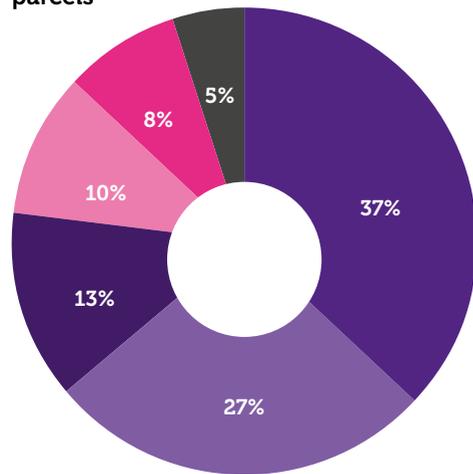
**Question:** Below is a list of common expenditures, please say what impact if any you think leaving the EU will have on you in relation to each of the following (list provided)

**Base size:** 1,000

**Source:** Social Market Research (SMR), Real and Perceived Impacts of the EU Exit for Northern Ireland Consumers, March 2021

11.5 The research shows the largest proportion of NI consumers send parcels to GB (27%), followed by RoI (10%). The findings identify that delivery delays are a common issue when sending to GB (28%) and RoI (24%). Additionally, consumers say they have experienced an increase in postage costs when sending parcels to GB (22%) and RoI (21%). Similar to other areas of research, potential price increases continue to be an area of concern for the NI consumer.

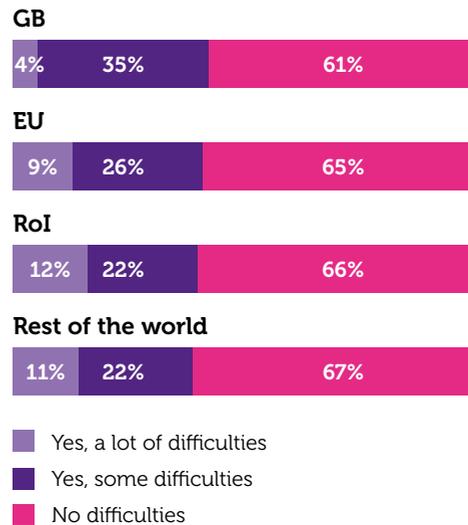
**Figure 5. Where consumers are sending parcels**



- More than one region
- Great Britain
- None
- Republic of Ireland
- Other EU Country
- Rest of the world

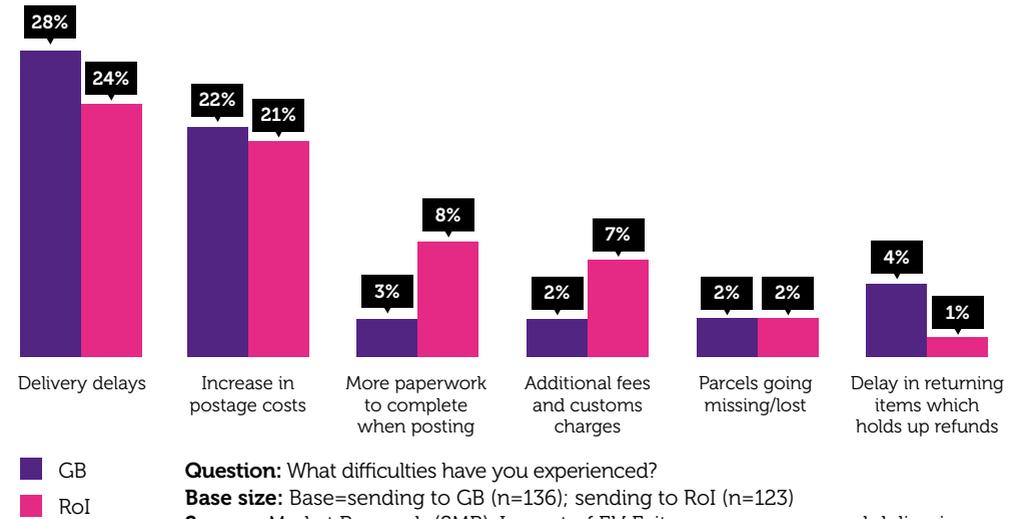
**Question:** Since the 1st of January of this year have you sent any parcels to?  
**Base:** 1,004  
**Source:** Social Market Research (SMR), Impact of EU Exit on consumer parcel deliveries, March 2021

**Figure 6. The proportion that have experienced difficulties**



**Question:** Have you experienced any difficulties sending parcels to?  
**Source:** Social Market Research (SMR), Impact of EU Exit on consumer parcel deliveries, March 2021

**Figure 7. Issues consumers have experienced**



**Question:** What difficulties have you experienced?  
**Base size:** Base=sending to GB (n=136); sending to RoI (n=123)  
**Source:** Market Research (SMR), Impact of EU Exit on consumer parcel deliveries, March 2021

**Online shopping**

11.6 Our research also provides valuable insight into NI consumers' online shopping experience. There are a number of benefits from online shopping for consumers including convenience, value for money and greater choice. Indeed, our focus groups help to support this with a consumer telling us:

"I'm used to the ease of shopping online, I've a young family and I'm busy, if I can simply go online, buy it and have it delivered, it's easier than running to the shops."

11.7 Nearly all NI consumers (92%) shop online. The most common items consumers buy are clothes (62%), shoes (39%), consumer electronics (34%), cosmetics (31%) and household goods like curtains and bedding (31%).

11.8 Our research also shows that the majority of online shopping comes from retailers in GB (69%), followed by NI (16%), the EU (7%), rest of the world (7%) and RoI (1%).

### Popularity of online shopping and top goods bought online

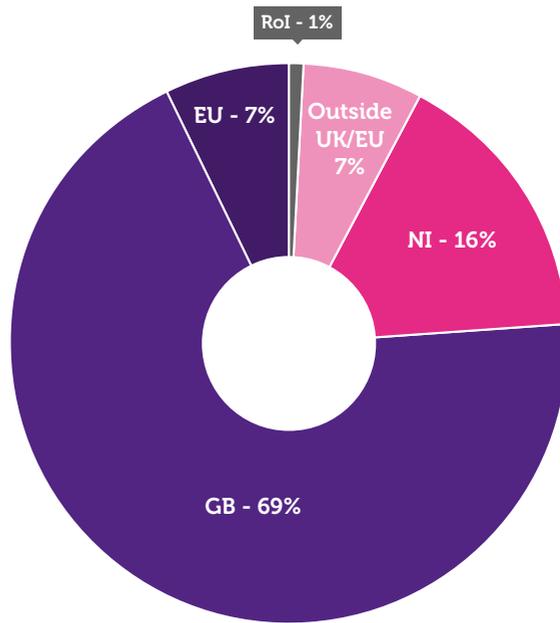


**92%**  
of NI Consumers currently shop online<sup>8</sup>

#### Top 5 goods bought online<sup>9</sup>

1. Clothing (66%)
2. Books, movies, music & games (44%)
3. Shoes (43%)
4. Consumer electronics (34%)
5. Cosmetics and body care (30%)

Figure 8. Where most online shopping come from



**Base:** 916  
**Source:** Social Market Research (SMR), Real and Perceived Impacts of EU Exit for Northern Ireland Consumers, March 2021

11.9 Our research shows the issues that consumers across NI have experienced since January 2021 when they shop online. These issues range from retailers no longer delivering to NI to problems returning goods (Figure 9).

11.10 The most significant issue is numerous GB retailers who have informed NI consumers that they no longer deliver to NI (68%). This should be considered alongside the finding that the majority of NI consumers currently shop online with GB retailers. Our focus groups provide some further insight.

"More recently since the Brexit transition period has ended, I've had numerous companies say they won't deliver items here or adding surcharges or cancelling orders."

11.11 It is also important to highlight that consumers have experienced delays, customs duties and issues with returning goods when buying from both GB and EU retailers (Figure 9). This shows that there is confusion in the online shopping market about how retailers handle purchases made by consumers living in NI.

Figure 9. Issues consumers have experienced when shopping online



**Question:** Since January have you experienced any of the following which you believe have been caused by leaving the EU (rather than Covid-19)?

**Base:** 916

**Source:** Social Market Research (SMR), Real and Perceived Impacts of EU Exit for Northern Ireland Consumers, March 2021

<sup>8</sup> Social Market Research, Real and Perceived Impacts of EU Exit for Northern Ireland, March 2021. Base size: 1,000.

<sup>9</sup> Social Market Research, The Impact of EU Exit on Consumer Postal Deliveries, March 2021. Base size 979.

11.12 With the most significant issue being consumers advised by retailers that they no longer deliver to NI, we have been monitoring this area as accurately as we can. While some retailers have resumed delivery, our monitoring activity estimates that currently between 155-170 GB retailers no longer deliver to NI influenced in some way by EU Exit<sup>8</sup>.

*"Sadly, under the terms of this Brexit agreement, we have yet to find a viable way of shipping to Northern Ireland. We are very disappointed by this and we hope to be delivering plants to our Northern Irish customers very soon!*

**(Gardening)**

11.13 This monitoring activity also shows what retailers are saying. For instance:

*"Due to customs clearance issues caused by Brexit, the shipment of orders to Northern Ireland is suspended from December 28, 2020 until further notice."*

**(Clothing and Footwear)**

*"Please note that we are currently unable to deliver to the EU or Northern Ireland. We are hoping to resume these deliveries as soon as possible."*

**(Health and Beauty)**

11.14 While these issues are a challenge, there is a clear opportunity to address this emerging issue. Retailers have expressed both a desire to deliver to NI and frustration at being unable to do so. Therefore, it is vital that the relevant authorities find a way to support retailers in their desire to resume their delivery to NI consumers.

## 12. Conclusion

- 12.1 Many consumers across NI are concerned about how they are, or might be in future, affected by EU Exit. The top concern is price increases. It is a difficult time for consumers as many will struggle to cope with any increases in the prices to goods and services across various markets.
- 12.2 Price increases also appear more specifically across consumer markets. Many consumers say they have noticed an increase in the cost of supermarket goods. Alongside this, there are indications of a reduction in choice as certain goods are no longer available.
- 12.3 Another area of concern is that there is confusion among consumers about their consumer rights and whether they are less well or better protected now. Consumers must be empowered to challenge poor service. This is the cornerstone of any market that works in the consumer interest. Consumers must be able to enforce their rights. But first consumers must be fully aware of what these rights are in the post-EU landscape.
- 12.4 The future of travel post-EU Exit is also a concern for NI consumers, for instance, issues around queuing at passport control, travel insurance price increases and getting medical treatment abroad. However, these views are grounded in consumer perception about future travel arrangements as many have been unable to travel due to the effect of COVID-19.
- 12.5 Consumers have identified concerns surrounding price increases and charges in digital markets. Consumers identify cross border issues especially the greater risk for those consumers living in border areas to receive roaming charges.
- 12.6 Consumers are clearer about how EU Exit has affected their experience when sending parcels and when they shop online. Two key issues are delivery delays and an increase in prices when consumers are sending parcels to GB and RoI. Consumers also experienced UK and EU online retailers saying they no longer deliver to NI which reduces choice and access to goods. The most significant issue is with GB based retailers taking this approach.
- 12.7 While not the focus of this report, it is vital to consider the context. The pandemic has put pressure on household finances and many have experienced an increase in the cost of household bills. However, while there are many challenges, there is a clear opportunity to address the emerging issues that are being influenced by EU Exit and to prevent these from escalating.

8. The Consumer Council. Monitoring activity. August 2021.

## **13. Way forward**

- 13.1 Our research provides insight into NI consumers' perceptions and experience of EU Exit. Consumers identify a number of concerns from price increases – real and perceived – across the various markets to a reduction in choice due to reduced availability of certain products locally in NI and through online shopping channels.
- 13.2 It is clear that these emerging challenges must be tackled by the UK Government and the EU. They must carefully consider the negative impact on NI consumers both now and in the future.
- 13.3 There is now the opportunity to put NI consumers at the centre of the UK and EU's decision making process so they make the right decisions for consumers here.
- 13.4 As our research has found, the main concern for consumers is price increases. This concern is echoed throughout our research in various areas including food shopping, travel, energy and food. Therefore, it is important that the Consumer Council continues to monitor price increases and the impact on consumers.
- 13.5 The Consumer Council will also continue to provide insight by commissioning further research into the financial resilience of NI consumers post-EU Exit. A specific emphasis will be placed on monitoring and protecting vulnerable consumers, especially low income consumers.
- 13.6 We will work collaboratively with governments and stakeholders to inform and influence policy making in a way that prevents detriment, supports early intervention and delivers positive outcomes for all consumers across NI.



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