

Northern Ireland Consumer Experience



An overview of EU Exit
experiences in 2022

September 2022



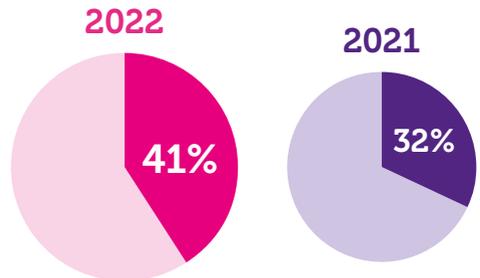
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1. Executive summary

- 1.1 The transition period following the United Kingdom's (UK) exit from the European Union (EU) ended on 31 December 2020. The Northern Ireland Protocol (NI Protocol) was implemented on the 1st of January 2021 with special arrangements and grace periods being enacted and extended to ease the impacts on Northern Ireland (NI) trade and border issues.
- 1.2 This research was commissioned to gauge the perceptions and impact EU Exit has had on the NI consumers one year following the end of the transition period. To do this, we commissioned two new studies with the fieldwork carried out from January to February 2022. These studies were:
- An online representative survey with 1,009 participants who were asked their opinions on a range of topics of concern such as consumer rights, food, post, travel, energy and shopping. The participants of this study were recruited to be reflective of NI's demographic population.
 - Online focus groups were also carried out to give participants a chance to further articulate their experiences of EU Exit. Eleven focus groups were conducted across each of NI's local government districts. Each focus group consisted of 8 participants.
- 1.3 This report identifies consumer feedback across a number of areas such as food, energy, travel, digital services and online shopping. By comparing the results to the survey we conducted in 2021, we can also observe how consumer perceptions and experiences have changed over time.
- 1.4 The key findings show:
- More than four in ten (41%) consumers surveyed report feeling that their rights will be less well protected having left the EU (32% in 2021). Consumers state that they require more information on the topics of their rights, travel information and 'actions I need to take'.

Figure 1: Consumers report feeling that their rights will be less protected having left the EU





- The top concerns for consumers were the economy of NI, price increases and maintaining a frictionless border with the Republic of Ireland (ROI).
- Price increases were of concern for consumers surveyed with 74% stating further price rises would negatively impact their finances (68% in 2021). Consumers reported that they perceived the most significant price increases due to EU Exit were found in food, energy, car insurance and mobile roaming charges.
- Consumers' food shopping experiences have been severely impacted in the last year, with consumers surveyed reporting higher prices, less availability, delivery delays and shorter shelf life. This has caused consumers to change their shopping habits with many reporting being forced to shop more frequently and to shop in cheaper bargain or discount stores.

- Consumers surveyed were unsure if energy price increases were attributable to EU Exit. Our quantitative research implies that the consumers believed energy related issues, such as price increases and security of supply were at least, in part, due to EU Exit. However, when our focus group discussed energy prices in more depth they stated that energy price increases are a global concern. A significant increase can be seen between 2021 and 2022 of consumers who state that they require more information regarding energy and utilities, likely explaining the confusion with attribution.



- Travel remains a difficult issue to assess with the fieldwork for this research taking place alongside COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns. However, consumer experiences of travel after EU Exit remain negative with the top issues being longer queues at passport control, worse exchange rates and driving in Europe. Travel with pets was also discussed and has the potential to be an emerging issue that will require close monitoring.



- Mobile roaming charges have been re-introduced to NI by a number of networks. Mobile roaming charges continue to be an area of concern for consumers with almost half (49%) reporting that they expect EU Exit to negatively impact the cost of operating a mobile phone.
- Retailers not delivering to NI remains a significant issue for consumers. Our research shows that 90% of consumers surveyed shop online with the majority of their shopping coming from Great Britain (GB) retailers (65%). More than three-quarters (77%) state they have had an experience with retailers who no longer deliver to NI from GB.
- Cross border shopping remains at a similar level to 2021 research, 11% of consumers stated they will now cross the border more to shop, 24% will cross the border less often, with more than half (54%) stating their cross border shopping habits will not change. The most popular items consumers cross the border to buy were petrol/diesel, food/drink and clothing.

- Although we see a multitude of opinions across all issues covered, some opinions continue to be tied to voting preference. Our research found that remain voters were more likely to view rising prices and goods shortages as a consequence of EU Exit. Leave voters continue to be less likely to attribute rising prices or goods shortages to EU Exit.



- 1.5 This research aimed to understand consumer experiences of EU Exit one year following its implementation and we have compared these results against 2021.

2. Who we are

2.1 The Consumer Council are the consumer representative body for 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:

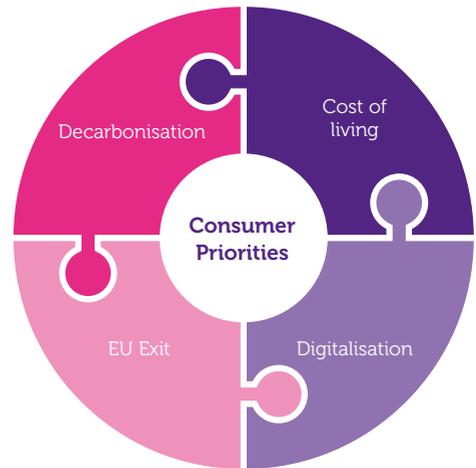
- who are disabled or have long-term health conditions;
 - who are of pensionable age;
 - who are on low incomes; and
 - who live in rural areas.
- 2.4 We have responsibilities under the Rural Needs Act 2016 and Section 75 of the NI Act 1998. In this role, we aim to ensure government policies recognise consumer needs in rural areas, and promote equality of opportunity and good relations across a range of equality categories.

3. Consumer priorities and the NI consumer position

Consumer priorities

- 3.1 The Consumer Council, using detailed analysis and evidence of the environment of NI, developed a framework of priorities which reflect our ambition of delivering inclusive societal and economic values.
- 3.2 These priorities consist of: Cost of living, EU Exit, Decarbonisation and Digitalisation and will be a key focus of ongoing work over the next number of years. It is vital that NI consumers are represented across these areas in order to prevent consumer detriment.
- 3.3 Cost of living now replaces COVID-19 as consumer priority, identified at the time of developing our Corporate Plan 2021-2024, due to the widening disparities in consumer experiences. More citizens became the 'working poor' as they struggled to make ends meet, accelerated by the end of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and the weekly £20 uplift to Universal Credit. This was coupled with cost of living increases, in energy costs from an unprecedented number of price increases, but also for food and personal finances, with UK inflation rising above 10% for the first time in 40 years.

- 3.4 A number of research projects are being undertaken by the Consumer Council in order to best represent the NI consumer position. These research projects will help us fulfil our 5 key strategic objectives in relation to EU Exit which include: understanding consumers, influencing policy, representing consumers, protecting consumers and empowering consumers.



The NI consumer position

3.4 To provide context to how the UK's exit from the EU has impacted NI consumers, it is important to understand NI's position within the United Kingdom and how our populations differ both economically and demographically.

Table 1: NI compared to the UK¹

Population	NI	UK
Total Population	1,895,500	67,081,200
Working age (16 - 64)	1,179,700 62.2%	41,845,000 62.4%
	NI	UK
In Employment	848,000 70.4%	32,493,000 75.6%
Unemployed	24,000 2.7%	1,336,000 3.9%
Economically Active	872,000 72.5%	33,829,000 78.7%
Economically Inactive	320,000 27.5%	8,790,000 21.3%
Seasonally Adjusted Claimant Count	39,628 4.0%	1,757,390 4.4%

3.5 As Table 1 shows, there are a number of differences in the NI population compared to the UK. As can be seen, NI's population is just 3% of the UK, has a lower employment rate and a higher rate of economic inactivity.

NI makes up
3%
 of the UK
 population



¹ National Online Manpower Information System (NOMIS). Office for National Statistics, UK, 2021-Jan 2022

Further research also shows:

- More NI consumers live in rural areas compared to urban, over double compared to the UK (35% vs 16.4%)²;
- NI has more consumers with a disability or long-term illness who rely on government support (30.1% vs 24.4%)³;
- NI's lowest earning households⁴ see approximately 74% of their income stemming from social securities (benefits), compared to 62% in the UK⁵;
- The gross weekly income for the lowest earning households in NI (£235) is 11% lower than the UK (£261)⁶.

Across the last six months of data (Q4 2021 to Q1 2022), NI's lowest earning households saw their post-tax income rise by only 0.3% - an increase of less than £1 (£229.56 to £230.27). However, their spending on essentials increased by 4.7% (£192.34 to £201.41).



As a result, discretionary income for NI's lowest earning households fell 22.5% (£37.22 to £28.86), leaving these vulnerable households with less than £29 to spend per week to spend per week⁷.

3.6 Looking ahead, higher taxes, accelerating inflation, and a continued shortfall in wage growth are set to exert downward pressure on discretionary incomes into 2022, both in NI and across the UK.

3.7 These indicators emphasise NI's unique position within the UK. NI consumers make up only 3% of the UK population, meaning at the outset there is the risk that UK led legislation, regulation and markets may not fully meet NI consumer needs. With NI consumers being more at risk of experiencing economic detriment, it is important that their views and experiences are represented.

Over one third
of the NI population
live in rural areas

² NI: In Profile, Key statistics on Northern Ireland, Data from Dec 2019

³ Labour Market Profile - Northern Ireland, Dec 2021

⁴ 'Lowest earning households' definition: Quartiles are income values which divide the population, when ranked by household income, into four equal-sized groups. 'Lowest earning households', also known as Quartile 1, are the bottom 25 per cent of the income distribution.

⁵ Consumer Council, Northern Ireland Household Expenditure Tracker, August 2022

⁶ Consumer Council, Northern Ireland Household Expenditure Tracker, August 2022

⁷ Consumer Council, Northern Ireland Household Expenditure Tracker, August 2022

4. Introduction

- 4.1 At 11pm on 31 January 2020, the UK left the EU single market and customs union, with the transition period concluding on 31 December 2020. From this point UK-EU relations are governed according to the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement, including the NI Protocol. The NI Protocol was designed to avoid a hard border between NI and ROI and to ensure the integrity of the EU's single market for goods while facilitating unfettered access for NI goods to the GB market. This means that NI consumers are in a unique position compared to others in the UK.
- 4.2 In order to monitor the implications of EU Exit on consumers, the Consumer Council conducted research to gauge the perceptions and early experiences of EU Exit carried out early in 2021.
- 4.3 In order to monitor consumer concerns the Consumer Council commissioned research to gauge the impacts and provide insight into the experiences of NI consumers one year since the end of the transition period. This research aims to provide valuable insight and to help identify current and emerging issues of concern.
- 4.4 This report uses evidence gathered across two recently conducted studies and compares the results to the 2021 research, providing oversight of NI consumers' current behaviours, experiences and changes across this time period.
- 4.5 The fieldwork and research of this report was conducted late January – early February 2022 and outlines the impacts of EU Exit on NI consumers. By bringing together and comparing research this report shall:
- Prioritise and rank key concerns for consumers regarding EU Exit related issues;
 - Explore consumer opinions in relation to how their rights have been impacted;
 - Represent the consumer experience surrounding the availability and access to affordable food shopping;
 - Detail how consumers experience of travel has changed;
 - Explore the extent to which consumers have shifted towards digitalisation and online shopping;
 - Gain insight into the consumer experience of delivery issues and changes with cross border shopping since EU Exit; and
 - Compare the findings with 2021 research to outline key changes.

5. Methodology

5.1 The Consumer Council has commissioned a number of studies concerning consumers' perceptions and experiences of EU Exit. This report uses three specific studies, conducted in both 2021 and 2022 to outline and compare results across these time periods.

Quantitative research

5.2 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 report⁸ covered general consumer concerns and issues in relation to food, energy, travel, digital, postal services and online shopping. This consisted of a demographically representative sample of NI's population.

5.3 In January-February 2022, SMR repeated this research with a more recent representative online survey consisting of 1,009 consumers. This report was conducted with a similar methodology to the previous year's research with relevant questions being updated to reflect the current landscape in NI. This survey also consisted of a demographically representative sample of NI's population.

Qualitative research

5.4 In addition to the quantitative studies, a qualitative study was conducted. This study consisted of 11 focus groups (8 participants each), conducted across all local government districts in NI. This study was commissioned to complement the quantitative research and provide more context and depth into consumer experiences of EU Exit across NI.

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

⁸ The Northern Ireland Consumer Perspective: Early perceptions and experiences of EU Exit

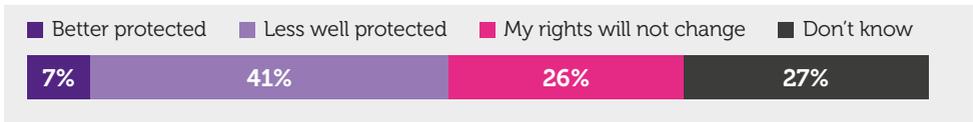
6. Consumer rights and concerns

Consumer rights

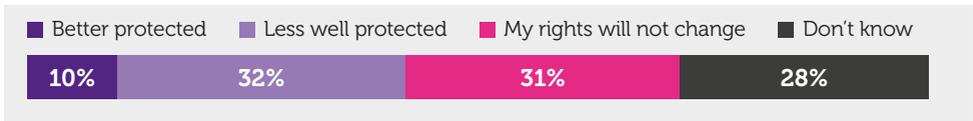
- 6.1 NI remains in a unique position today, having left the EU alongside the rest of the UK, while remaining part of the single market and sharing a land border with the EU member state ROI. With political discussions and debate continuing on the NI Protocol, NI consumers remain in a state of confusion concerning their rights and protections.
- 6.2 It is therefore incredibly important to understand how NI consumers feel regarding their rights and if they feel they are being protected. This will help us understand where further information is required to empower consumers.

Figure 2: Having left the EU how do you feel your consumer rights will be impacted?

2022



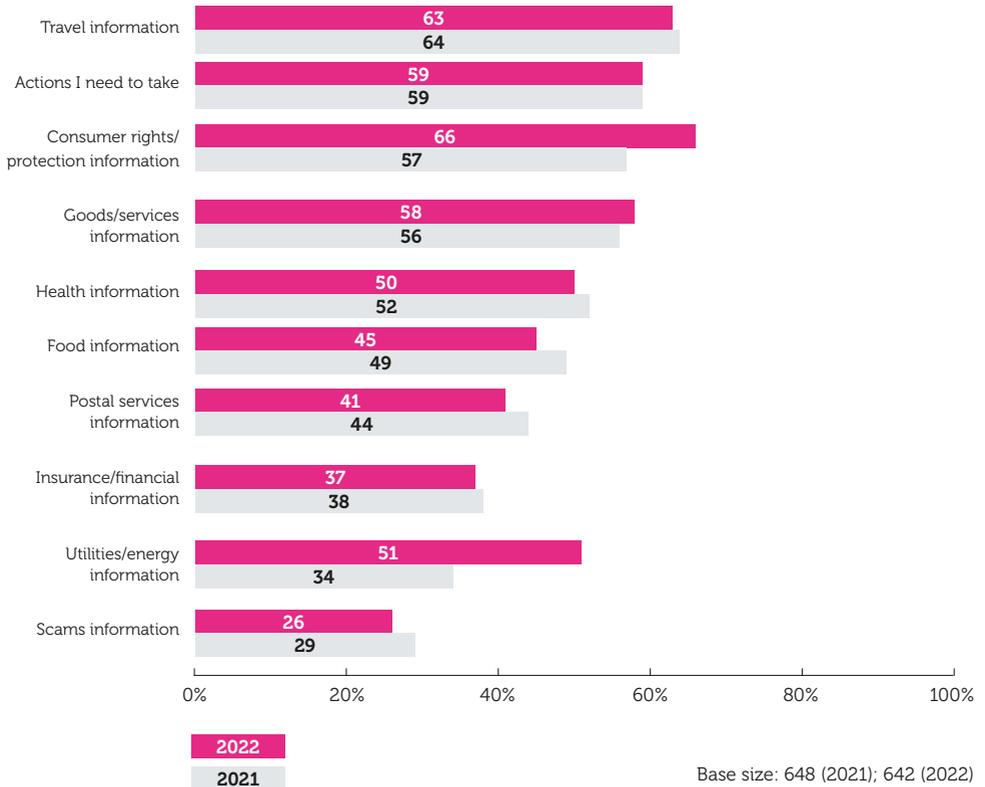
2021



Base size: 1,000 (2021); 1,009 (2022)

- 6.3 Since 2021, consumers' attitudes have significantly changed regarding their rights and protections. Fewer consumers expressed the belief that their rights would be better protected or that their rights would not change. A significant increase has been reported with consumers who believe that their rights will be less well protected.
- 6.4 This finding emphasises the need for consumers to be able to access specific guidance regarding EU Exit based concerns, in fact, 64% of consumers agreed that this specific guidance would be helpful to them (24% stated they were unsure).

Figure 3: What information do you require most in relation to EU Exit and its potential impact in Northern Ireland?



6.5 When consumers were asked what specific information they require in relation to EU Exit, travel and actions they need to take remained high between 2021 and 2022. A larger number of consumers also report requiring information on their rights and protections. This would appear to be a natural progression as consumers report feeling their rights are being less well protected compared to 2021. Consumers also report requiring more information on utilities and energy (further discussed in section 9).

6.6 Our qualitative research provides more detailed responses to consumer rights with consumers expressing exasperation and frustration that the NI consumer position has not been clarified and their rights remain an ongoing area of debate. Consumers have expressed a need for clarity stating:

“Everything needs to be laid out for consumers and suppliers. The people that we buy from don’t seem to understand the rules any more than we do. So, it needs to be made clear and simple for all.”

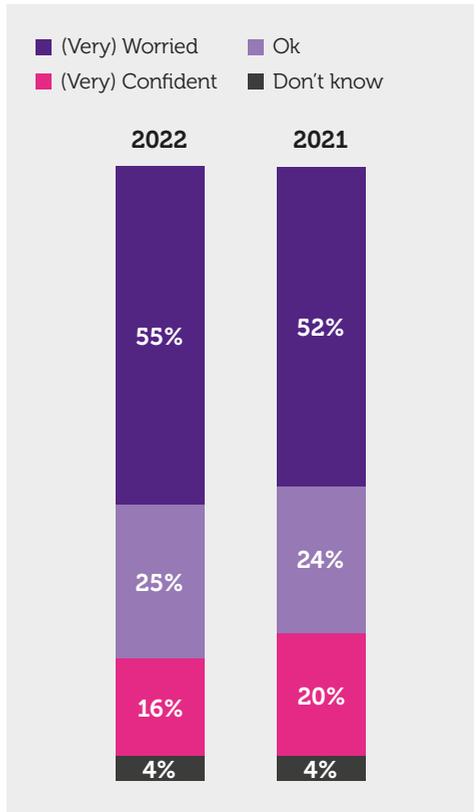
“The government says one thing and some companies say and do other things regarding delivery, VAT and import duties. We need to have a reliable source of information to point to, preferably on a government website.”

6.7 A number of consumers reported favouring official online sources for important information such as NI Direct, Consumer Council, Advice NI, Invest NI and local councils.

Consumer Concerns

6.8 Over half (55%) of those surveyed expressed feeling either ‘worried’ or ‘very worried’ regarding EU Exit in 2022 (Figure 4). This is a slight increase compared to 2021, with fewer respondents reporting feeling confidence having left the EU in 2022.

Figure 4: As a Northern Ireland consumer, how do you feel now that we have left the EU?



Base size: 1,000 (2021); 1,009 (2022)

6.9 This research also presented participants with a list of the top EU Exit related concerns and asked them to list their concerns in order of priority. Table 2 shows the ranked consumer concerns listed as follows:

Table 2: Ranked EU Exit concerns by year

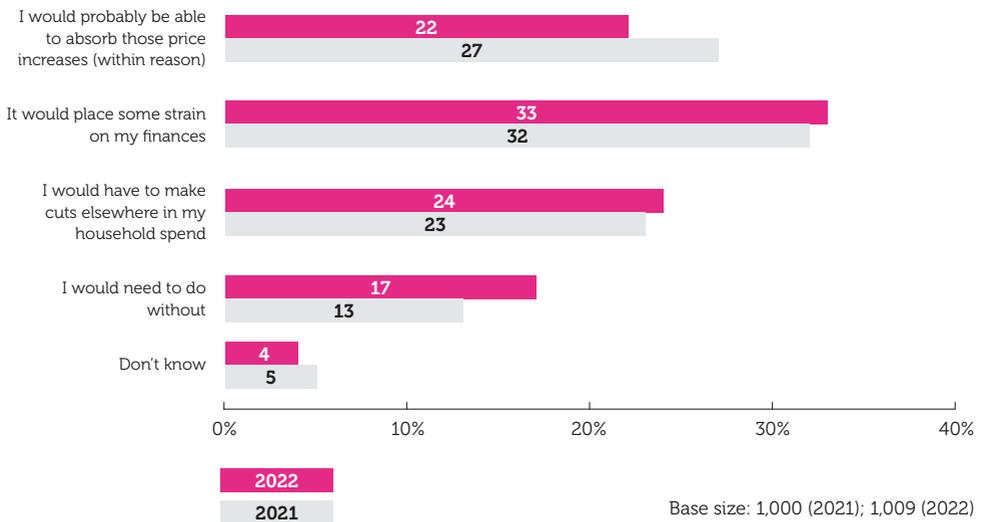
	2022	2021
1	Economy of NI	Price increases
2	Price increases	Economy of NI
3	Maintaining a frictionless border with the ROI	Maintaining a frictionless border with the ROI
4	Introduction of customs checks	Reduction of choice of retailers/ products available in NI
5	Reduction of choice of retailers/ products available in NI	Introduction of tariffs on goods sourced from outside NI
6	Reduction in quality of food standards	Introduction of customs checks
7	Introduction of tariffs on goods sourced from outside NI	Longer delivery times
8	Maintaining products safety and standards	Reduction in quality of food standards
9	Longer delivery times	Reduction in product safety standards
10	Maintaining consumer protections	Reduction of consumer protections

6.10 As Table 2 shows, the top three concerns for NI consumers remains the same, albeit the order is now slightly different. The economy, price increases and maintaining a frictionless border with ROI remain the top concerns for NI consumers.

7. General price increases

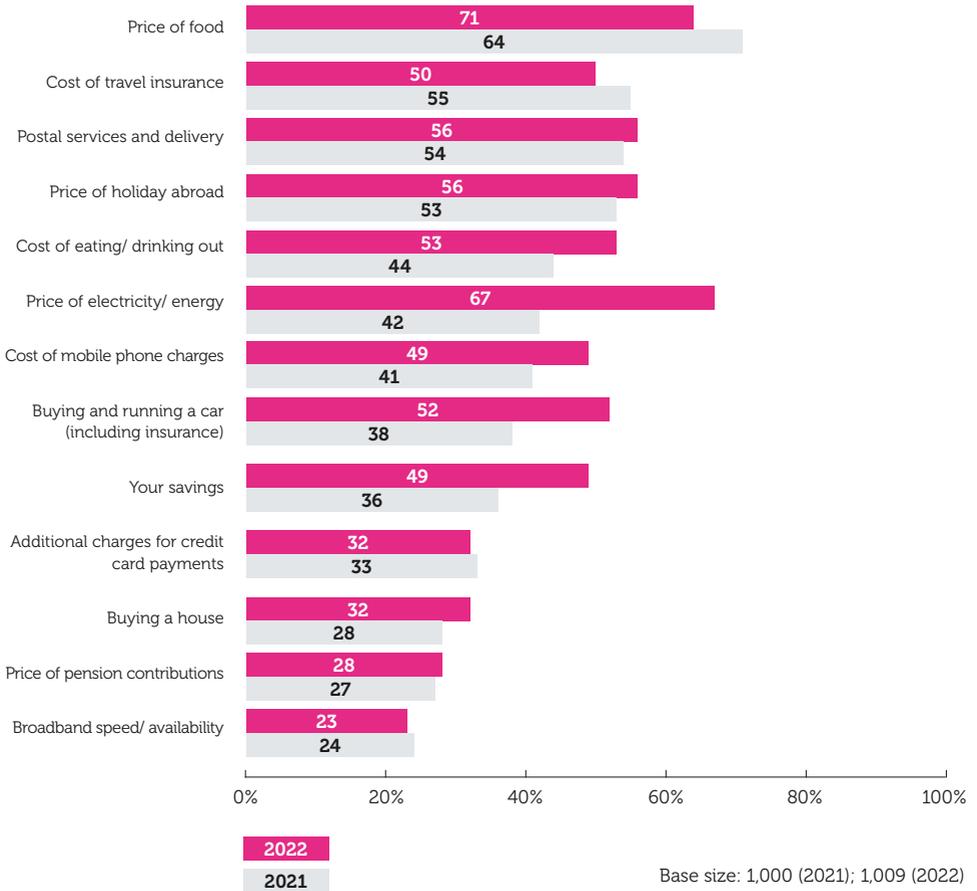
7.1 Price increases remains a key and growing concern for NI consumers. Price increases and higher costs of living rates are set to impact all consumers. Our research (Figure 5) shows how consumers believe their personal finances would be impacted if prices were to increase further due to EU Exit.

Figure 5: If prices in general were to rise following our exit from the EU, what impact would this have on your finances?



7.2 Compared against responses from the previous year, a larger percentage of consumers expressed greater difficulty in their ability to absorb price increases. Unsurprisingly, the greatest concern for personal financial detriment was expressed from lower income consumers. Figure 5 shows that almost three quarters (74%) of NI consumers would be negatively impacted if prices were to continue to rise.

7.3 Consumers were also asked what impact they believed EU Exit would have across a number of common expenditures. The majority of consumers believed that EU Exit would have a negative impact on expenditures such as the price of food, travel, and utilities.

Figure 6: Do you believe EU Exit will have a negative impact on the following?

7.4 Figure 6 shows the negative impact consumers expect on common expenditures. The price of food is perceived to be the most negatively impacted and in 2022 consumers show a much more negative view, believing EU Exit is negatively impacting their expenses. The largest differences between years can be seen regarding energy prices (25%), savings (13%), motor expenses (14%), mobile phone charges (8%) and food (7%).

7.5 Our qualitative research helped to further highlight some of the pricing issues consumers faced. Consumers reported price increases across a number of sectors including, supermarket shopping, restaurants, mobile roaming, travel, and energy.

- 7.6 A number of participants in these focus groups expressed a belief that price increases are likely due to suppliers and retailers setting higher prices in order to recoup losses made because of the COVID-19 pandemic or EU Exit claiming:

"I am really suspicious about retailers generally, that they are raising their prices because they can hide behind Brexit or COVID-19."

"Businesses are trying to recoup profits lost from Brexit and they are clawing back COVID-19 losses. The big chain restaurants are putting up prices just because they can."

"I'm disappointed with food prices as I think supermarkets have taken advantage that we had to go to them during the pandemic. As soon as the pandemic hit, the offers disappeared, hopefully now they'll have to lower those prices again and bring back offers."

Building materials

- 7.7 A further price increase highlighted within the research was the cost of building materials. Consumers report rising prices in raw materials and longer waiting times for supplies. This was a growing concern for consumers, who stated:

"Prices are going crazy especially building supplies. The price of a sheet of chipboard has gone up from £12 to £44 and that is because of Brexit according to the supplier. So, I have had to put my loft conversion off for the foreseeable future."

7.8 The research showed these price increases were causing changes to consumer behaviour, such as more consumers travelling across the border to purchase building supplies⁹ (9% in 2021 vs 19% in 2022). Furthermore, consumers have reported postponing plans for home improvements such as extension or refurbishment due to the uncertainty in the building sector. These consumers stated:

“Me and my partner wanted to build, but with the price of material and all we had to put that on hold it wasn't worth it. Contacting builders who didn't want to give us a price as they said it would change too quickly. We would love to build but at this moment we just can't with the price of materials, don't know if that's down to COVID or Brexit as well, jury's out.”

“My building extension has been stalled because of a shortage of material and a hike in prices generally. The architect advised us to hold off for a year to see if prices come down again.”



7.9 Consumers remarked that the availability of building materials could be the unwillingness of some GB based suppliers to send goods to NI. However, consumers were undecided as to whether EU Exit was the cause of the rising price of materials. With the increased observations and consumer feedback, the cost and availability of building materials is an emerging area of interest and will require close monitoring in further research.



⁹ See Figure 15 (page 35)

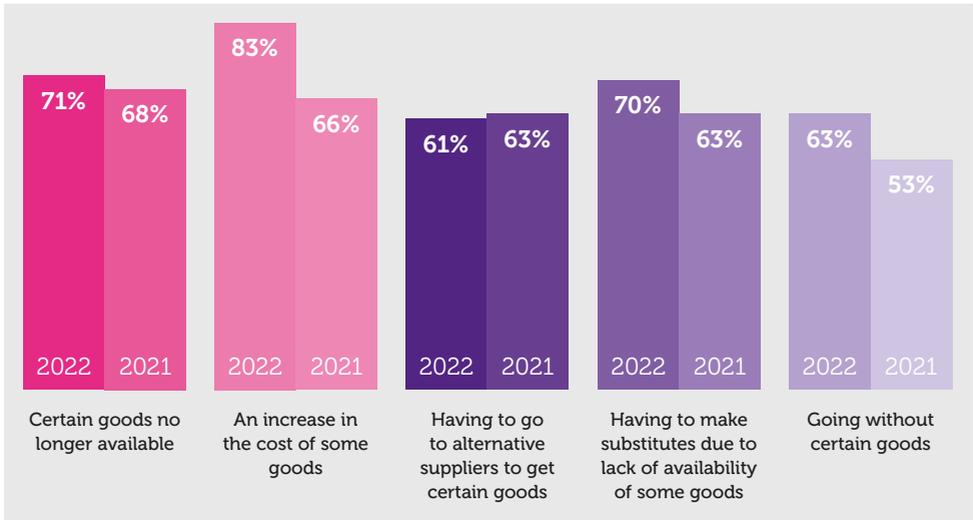
8. Food and the shopping experience

Consumer general food experience

8.1 This research provides insight into how consumers view their access to food has been impacted in 2022. Previous research conducted in 2021 found that the majority of consumers reported a negative experience in regard to food availability or price. This is a trend that continues into 2022.

8.2 Figure 7 shows how consumer experience of their supermarket shop has changed in 2022. The most significant changes are with consumers reporting price increases (2021 66% vs 2022 83%) and 'going without certain foods' (2021 53% vs 2022 63%).

Figure 7: Consumers' experience of their supermarket shop



Base size: 1,000 (2021); 1,009 (2022)

Price increases

8.3 The research also showed that almost three-quarters (72%) of consumers reported that food price increases would negatively impact their financial wellbeing. Whether this was by putting a strain on their finances (32%), forcing consumers to make cuts elsewhere in the household spend (26%) or by 'having to go without' (14%). These price increases were also a major talking point for our focus group respondents who stated:

"The price of my weekly shopping has gone way up. What was £80 for us is now £110 while incomes have stayed the same."

"My weekly shop up from £80 to £100 and that is me being more careful than before and buying the cheapest I can find."

8.4 Price increases were one of the largest concerns for all consumers surveyed with low income and younger consumers (18-34) reporting the most significant strain. However, consumers also reported a number of further issues related to food and food shopping, which are altering their food shopping behaviours. One such issue is the lack of availability of certain goods.

Food availability

8.5 Food availability was an issue which consumers viewed as being EU Exit related. Consumers reported a shortage of goods, less choice of goods and an increase in the amount of empty shelves at supermarkets. Consumers also noted that reduced choice is likely specific to NI as they remarked GB is not experiencing the same levels of shortages.

"I would say that the most noticeable thing is that the cost of stuff has risen or else they are just not available anymore."

"In supermarkets, you wouldn't have as much choice in the likes of [supermarket chain]. Before, there were never any gaps on shelves but now there's gaps as they don't seem to be getting the same number of products and I'm assuming that's down to Brexit or the Protocol."

Delivery delays and shelf life

8.6 Another food issue that is causing consumers concern is longer delivery times due to EU Exit. With EU Exit resulting in more complicated processes and stages to the delivery of goods, food is being delivered at a much later date. This is likely one of the driving factors in food availability, with consumers reporting much shorter shelf life for fresh produce, causing food to be of lower quality when it reaches consumers.

"When you go for fresh produce, when you get to the shop it's already not in good condition and then when you get it home a few days later it's not the same."

8.7 Our focus groups consisted of a number of participants who worked in large supermarkets who further emphasized delays. They stated that extra checks and processes are causing food to expire much more quickly, which can cause additional waste in-store.

"If you have 10 trays there has to be a piece of paper for every tray. We get 90 and paperwork for everyone and the stuff coming in out of date within a day and sometimes it doesn't even hit the shop floor, it's waste."

"I've worked in a supermarket for 22 years. About the issues happening around stock coming in, something that took a day to come in it now takes 5 days so when it arrives it has shorter life. Anything from a root, from the ground, 5 checks have to be done before it enters Northern Ireland."

Changes to consumer behavior

8.8 With food shopping experiences seeing significant changes it is unsurprising that consumer attitudes and behaviours have also seen changes. Consumers now report shopping for food on a more frequent basis as the shorter shelf life forces them to shop daily (rather than weekly) to avoid stricter expiry dates.

8.9 This more frequent food shopping has also caused consumers to supplement their food shopping with items from other stores/suppliers (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Beside the supermarket (either in-store or online) where else do you purchase your food?



Base size: 1,009 (2022)

8.10 Consumers who reported using alternatives to larger supermarket chains reported this was due to: availability of items/shortages/empty shelves (72%), delivery issues (5%), price increases (3%) and value for money (1%).

8.11 Our research in 2021 revealed a trend in consumer spending habits. This research found that that price increases were constraining consumer choice, however consumers did express an opinion that they would be willing to pay more for goods to maintain their current shopping standards¹⁰.

8.12 However, consumers are now reporting that instead of simply using the next cheapest supermarket, their finances are forcing them to go straight for the discount stores and cheapest options available.

"I don't go to [supermarket chain] as much, it's not that I go to the next cheapest like [supermarket chain], I go to the very cheapest bargain shops"

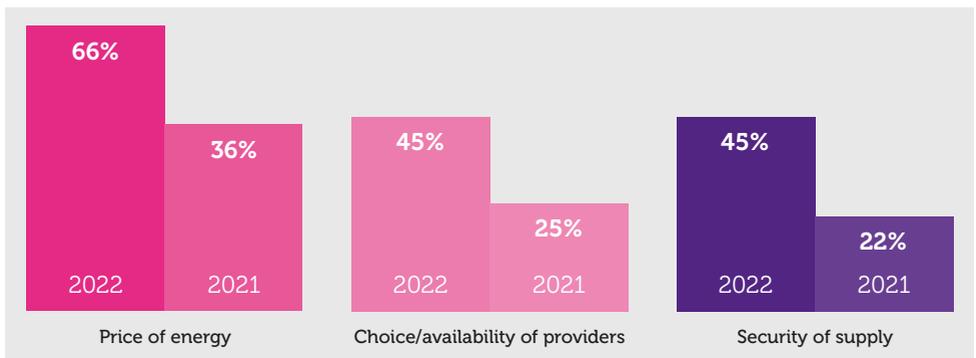
"I buy supermarket own brands now. [supermarket chain] is not as cheap as it was and I go now to [discount store] and the [discount store]."

¹⁰ Ipsos Mori: EU Exit – Impact on NI consumers

9. Energy - perceptions on price, choice and supply

- 9.1 At the time this research was conducted energy prices increases had become a global concern with widespread media coverage. Initially, fuel and energy prices saw a sharp increase with demand outpacing supply during the easing of COVID-19 and its restrictions.
- 9.2 These supply issues were further exacerbated with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russia being a huge energy exporter and the largest exporter of natural gas worldwide. NI consumers have not been immune to these issues and the ensuing price increases.
- 9.3 Figure 3 (page 13) shows that between 2021 and 2022 consumers have stated that they now require more information regarding energy and utilities. Therefore, it is understandable that consumers have expressed differing views on energy issues within our research. This may be due to consumers' difficulty discerning if changes in energy price and availability are due to EU Exit, COVID-19 or other general global issues.
- 9.4 Overall, the majority of consumers have expressed negative experiences regarding energy related issues. Figure 9 shows that consumers attribute this (at least in part) to EU Exit. A massive shift can be seen with consumers reporting a large negative increase in their experience across energy issues including: price of energy, choice of provider and security of supply.

Figure 9: EU Exit's negative impact on energy (electric, gas, home heating oil, petrol)



Base size: 1,000 (2021); 1,009 (2022)

9.5 During our additional qualitative research, focus group interviewees were asked to discuss fuel and energy price increases. In this focus group format, participants were more likely to recognise that global issues were responsible for escalating prices rather than EU Exit. They stated:



“The price of utilities is a global problem and not Brexit.”

“Oil costs much more and utilities are sky high, but I don’t think that is because of Brexit, that’s world shortages.”

“Heating and electricity has doubled in price now. I used to get 40 units of gas for £20 now I get 22 units. Mind you I don’t think that has anything to do with leaving the EU.”

9.6 However, concerning the cause of energy availability and prices, opinions fall alongside voting lines. Those who voted to remain in the EU were likely to attribute price increase to the shortage of Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) drivers and supply chain issues. Whereas, leave voters were more likely to regard these issues as in line with global changes in energy supply.

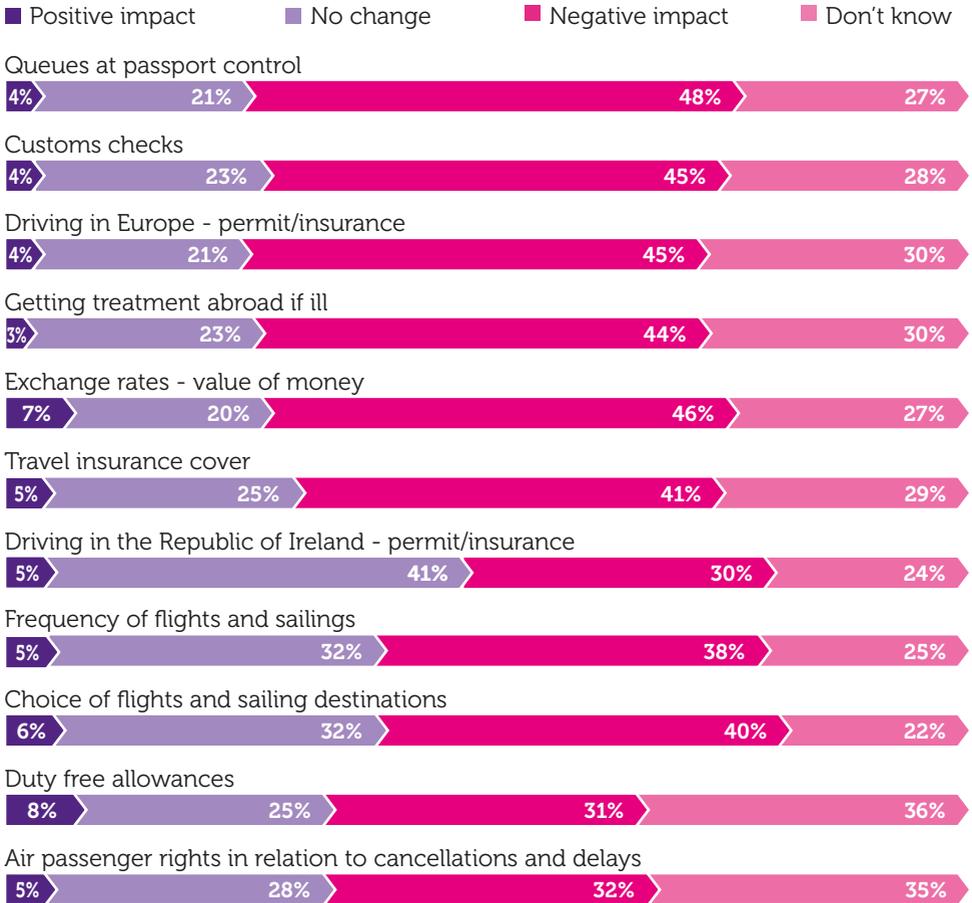
9.7 Regardless of attribution, energy price and supply remains a central issues in consumers’ daily lives and is set to exacerbate the current cost of living crisis.

10. Travel - travelling and accessing health treatment

- 10.1 The Consumer Council provides advice and guidance to NI consumers on how travelling in Europe (including ROI) has/will be impacted following EU Exit. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers had less direct experience with travel than usual. Consumers also found it difficult to distinguish between the impact of COVID-19 and those of EU Exit on their travel arrangements. Travel remains an area where consumers state they require information regarding changes with EU Exit (63% of respondents stated they require travel information).
- 10.2 Our qualitative research found that most respondents were aware of passport related issues such as having a valid passport 6 months before departure date. However, consumers were confused as to the current requirements regarding green cards and driving in the EU. As of 30 June 2021, green card insurance documentation is no longer required, under an agreement between the Motor Insurance Bureau of Ireland (MIBI) and the EU Commission.
- 10.3 Our quantitative research (Figure 10) shows that the majority of consumers expect EU Exit to have a negative impact on their travel arrangements including passport control queues, exchange rates, customs checks and driving in Europe.



Figure 10: EU Exit's (perceived) impact on travel



Base size: 1,009 (2022)

10.4 The second most common response to perceived impact on travel was 'don't know'. Significantly more consumers answered 'don't know' compared to 2021 research¹¹. This may be due to less respondents travelling during the pandemic or general confusion as to if travel disruptions can be attributed to EU Exit.

10.5 One area of travel that showed low levels of awareness was travelling with pets or assistance dogs and what, if any, additional requirements are needed to travel with pets (including passports, microchips, vaccinations and health checks). Our research shows that only 26% of consumers report being aware of requirements when travelling with pets (42% say they are unaware, 32% state they don't know). Consumers within the focus group stated that any additional requirements will deter them from travelling between NI and GB. Consumers stated:

"We have a dog. My wider family live in Scotland and last year we went to the vet and said we were going over and the dog had to have rabies injection, have a chip. They couldn't find the chip although it had been chipped, so it had to be re-chipped and altogether cost £70. These things only last 3 years so will I have to pay again to go to Scotland, crazy."

"We have a place in Donegal. We have a dog, it's only a wee shih tzu..... and they stopped us and said if we have a dog we would be fined on the spot and returned home and not allowed to go into Donegal. Now it's not worth the risk."

"Coming out of Great Britain all horses now need certificates, so I don't take horses from there anymore. To take horses to EU it is much easier since Brexit and cheaper to go through ROI instead of going through Great Britain as we used to."

10.6 Travel remained a difficult area to accurately assess consumer perceptions and insights. With fewer consumers traveling due to COVID-19 and travel restrictions at the time of this research (Jan-Feb), future research will give us a more accurate depiction of EU Exit's impact on consumers travel.

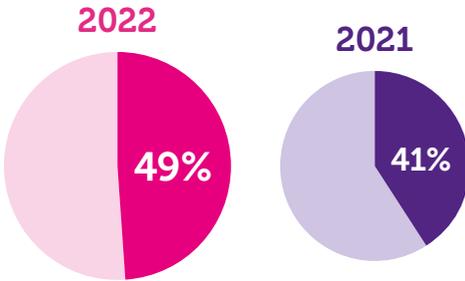
¹¹ The Northern Ireland Consumer Perspective: Early perceptions and experiences of EU Exit (2021)

11. Digital services, parcels and online shopping

Digital services

11.1 Digital services continues to be an area of concern for consumers in 2022. More than four in ten (41%) consumers believed mobile phone charges would be negatively impacted in 2021, with that figure rising to almost half (49%) in 2022.

Figure 11: I believe the cost of mobile phone charges will be negatively impacted by EU Exit



Base size: 1,000 (2021); 1,009 (2022)

11.2 Concerns of price increases from consumers proved justified with a number of mobile phone operators introducing roaming charges when travelling to the EU. Since January 2021 the guarantee of free roaming for UK mobile users in the EU has ended. Now mobile operators may choose to introduce mobile roaming charges at their own discretion.

11.3 Consumers within our focus groups criticised these charges as an unnecessary way to make more money. These consumer stated:

"I hear that they are bringing in the roaming charges again, that's just companies putting the arm in. They still made big profits during the time when they weren't allowed to charge for roaming, so why do they need to bring the charge back. They are just sticking the arm in."

"It has gone back to the way it was with roaming charges. It's hard to know if we are in or out of Europe."

11.4 Depending on the network, mobile roaming charges may now be applicable to new and existing customers. As this issue is ongoing, close monitoring will be required to understand consumer awareness and experience as they travel in the future.

Online shopping

11.5 Online shopping is an ever expanding marketplace. With the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns accelerating the rate at which consumers use the internet to shop. However, this trend in increased online shopping may become a permanent feature for consumers who praise the convenience of shopping online stating:

"I shop a lot more online. Local shops are very low on stock, but the things are usually available online."

"There is more online since COVID-19, better choice lower prices, plus fast delivery if you use [online retailer]."

"I find more availability online, more selection online. I avoided the town a lot and shopped a lot online. Bulky things are difficult to get delivered to Northern Ireland but smaller things, clothes and that, are easy enough to buy, cheap as chips and no hassle to send back."

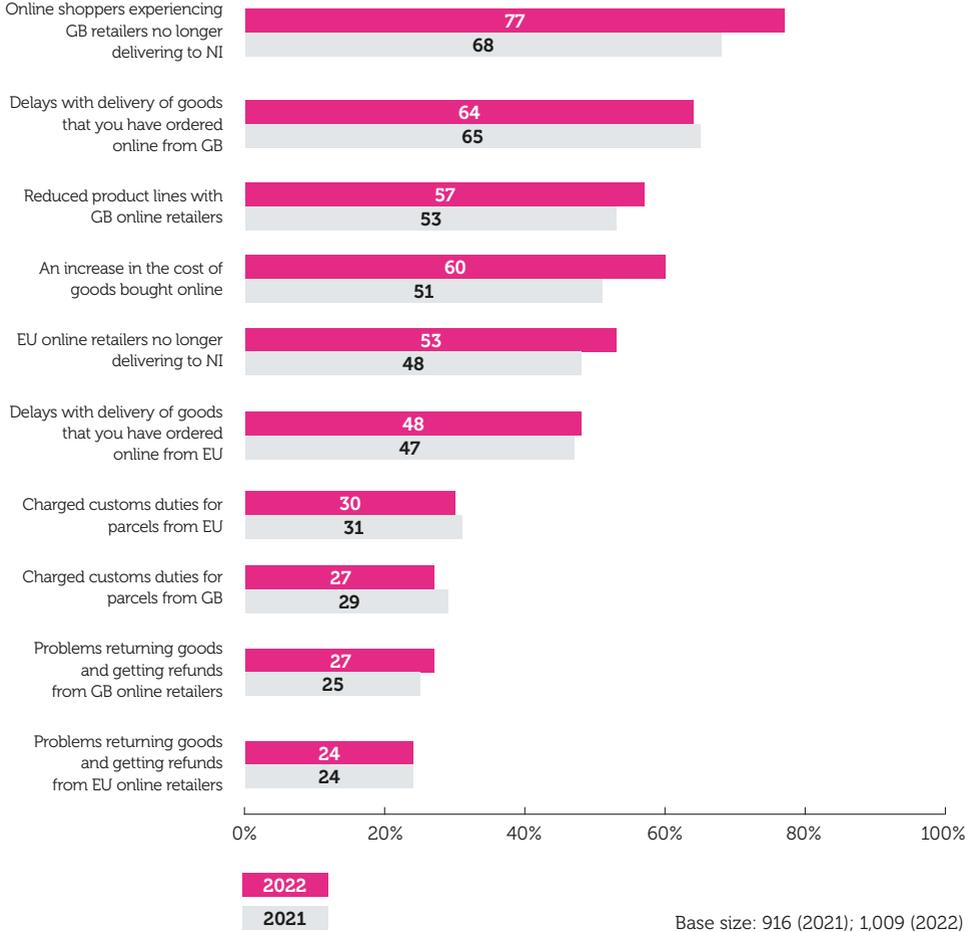
11.6 Our research shows that 90% of consumers report shopping online in 2022. This research also shows that the majority of these items (65%) come from GB retailers.

11.7 With this increase in online shopping, consumers are receiving more parcels by post and via courier services. There continued to be confusion and a lack of awareness about shipping regulations and consumers are reporting numerous negative consequences to their online shopping.

11.8 Figure 12 (page 31) shows the negative impacts consumers report on their online shopping due to EU Exit. As can be seen, a large proportion of consumers who shop online report negative experiences with speed, availability, supply, cost and how easy it is to return goods.



Figure 12: Online shopping experiences consumers attribute to leaving the EU



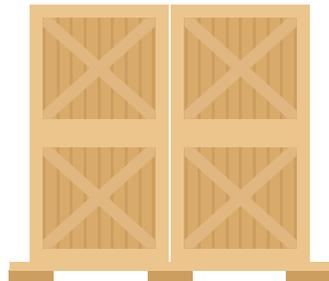
11.9 The largest concern for consumers remains 'GB retailers no longer delivering to NI'. This issue also shows the most significant increase between 2021 and 2022.

11.10 Since January 2021, the Consumer Council has monitored, as accurately as it can, the number of GB retailers who have ceased to deliver to NI citing EU Exit as the reason. Currently we are aware of approximately 119-132 businesses¹² not delivering to NI. We also continue to add retailers when we are made aware of this issue.

GB online retailers not delivering is reported as a range (119-132). This reflects the 119 businesses that have indicated non delivery due to EU Exit and an additional 13 businesses that are not delivering to Northern Ireland but have not confirmed this is specifically due to EU Exit.

It is important to note that this is unlikely to be a comprehensive list, nor does it take into consideration online marketplaces, so it is likely that the number is greater than the Consumer Council is able to monitor/aware of and can report on.

We have provided a chart (Figure 13, page 33) detailing how, as of May 2022, the 132 businesses breakdown by sector. This provides insight into the types of products that NI consumers are finding it harder to access from GB retailers.



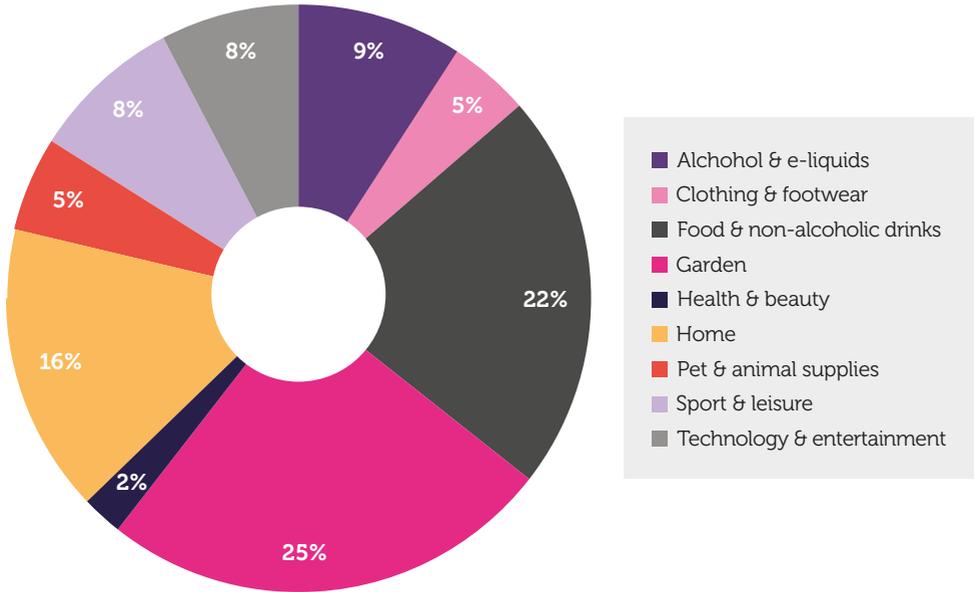
¹² This data has been compiled using reports by consumers from January 2021 to May 2022 of GB retailers not delivering to NI and manual checks by Consumer Council staff on retailer websites to verify this is the case.

These figures are not complete, nor are they based on a representative sample of businesses or sectors.

The data are not official statistics, but they can provide some useful insight into the types of GB retailers citing EU Exit as their reason for ceasing deliveries to NI.

Please note these figures are subject to change as and when we are made aware of companies stopping or resuming deliveries to NI.

Figure 13: Current retailers not delivering by sector¹³



11.11 Our data shows that the largest impacted sectors are garden, food and non-alcoholic drinks, followed by home.

11.12 A number of retailers in the home and garden sectors have stated that they cannot deliver to NI due to regulations such as the need for a phytosanitary certificate for plants, or because of issues transporting larger and heavier items such as furniture or home supplies.

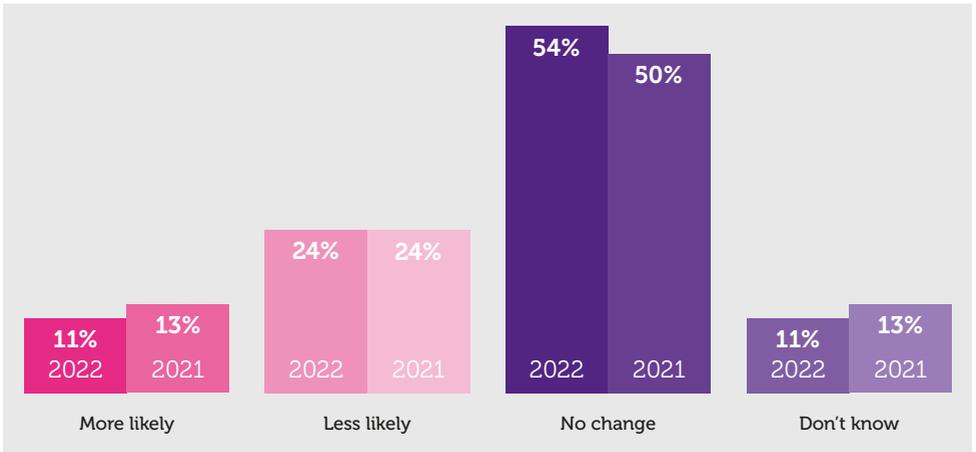
11.13 The Consumer Council has no insight of whether these commercial decisions are temporary or permanent, however, there has been a steady increase in the number of companies we are aware of resuming deliveries to NI.

¹³ <https://www.consumerCouncil.org.uk/policy-research/publications/overview-note-gb-retailers-not-delivering-ni>

Cross border shopping

11.14 Crossing the border to shop is a common occurrence that has typically fluctuated depending on exchange rates and differences in economic performances. Figure 14 shows similar opinions persist regarding cross border shopping between 2021 and 2022.

Figure 14: As a result of leaving the EU are you more or less likely to travel across the border to purchase goods or services in the Republic of Ireland?



Base size: 1,000 (2021); 1,009 (2022)

11.15 Of those who stated they are more likely to cross the border to purchase goods or services the top reasons for doing so was due to:

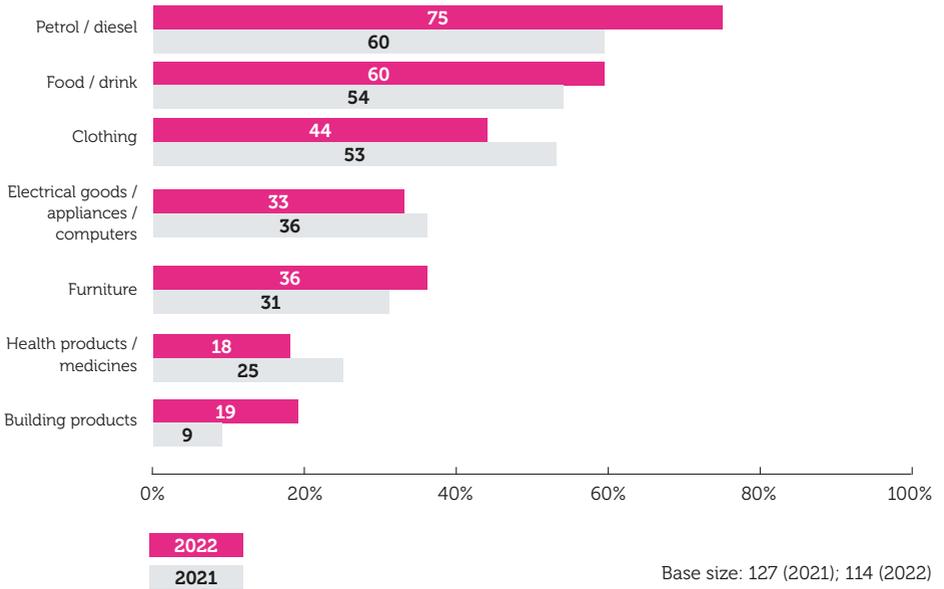
76% More choice and availability

39% Avoid customs duties/ tariffs

68% Cheaper goods and services

19% Convenience

Figure 15: Why are you more likely to cross the border to shop? (goods)



11.16 Fuel remains the top item consumers cross the border to purchase. With ongoing energy price increases likely causing the increased fuel shopping across the border between 2021 and 2022.



11.17 The border is of great concern to NI consumers ranking 3rd in consumer priority both in 2021 and 2022. These consumers stated that maintaining a frictionless border with ROI was very important. Our focus groups participants discussed the border in more depth, expressing concern and frustration that the matter remains ongoing. The majority of participants stated that a hard border on the island of Ireland would be divisive. However, consumers also expressed displeasure with a border being drawn in the Irish Sea. They stated:

“The Protocol could work for everybody and make it more profitable being in the UK and EU. But the argument about where the border sits, whether it is in Irish Sea or not, is holding us all back from seeing the benefits.”

“We don’t want any border controls between the north and the south. That just can’t happen, it would take us back years and we might end up in the bad old days of violence again. Nobody wants that.”

“There will be a lot of unrest if they don’t get the Protocol sorted. There has to be a border somewhere, but not in the Irish sea.”

11.18 The focus groups did not discuss solutions to how the border issues could be resolved. They did express a need for border issues to be resolved promptly as the waiting and deferrals are also causing frustration.



12. Conclusion

- 12.1 Similar to 2021, it was difficult for consumers to distinguish the impacts of EU Exit from those of wider global issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic or trade relations with Russia. With increases to the cost of living, the price of goods and services were of major concern to consumers.
- 12.2 Price increases were a central issue across all areas discussed. With negative impacts to prices being expected across: food, travel, postage, energy, mobile phone charges, housing and negatively impacting consumers' ability to save money. With price increases rising alongside consumers reporting less overall financial resilience, the most financially vulnerable in society are set to be the first and most severely impacted.
- 12.3 A negative food shopping experience was an area in which consumers closely attributed to EU Exit. Consumers reported a significant increase to cost, empty shelves and shorter use by dates, which has had the effect of changing consumers shopping habits.
- 12.4 Consumer rights and protection is an area of key importance to the Consumer Council. Our research shows that a large proportion of NI consumers feel less well protected and worried due to EU Exit. The need was emphasised for a non-political consumer body to provide clear accurate information regarding EU Exit. The Consumer Council aims to provide information on all current and emerging issues which may impact consumers' rights and to represent their concerns. Therefore, we will continue to monitor how EU Exit impacts NI consumers and how we can continue to empower the consumer to challenge poor service and any infringement on their rights and protections.

- 12.5 Travel related issues and how they have been impacted by EU Exit remains an area difficult to examine and assess. With COVID-19 restrictions and travel restrictions being in place during the fieldwork for this research, consumers have less direct experience travelling abroad. However, consumers do still express concerns with how EU Exit impacts/will impact travel, with consumers expecting their travel to be negatively impacted overall. Consumers were particularly concerned about the impacts EU Exit will have on queues at passport control, exchange rates, customs checks and driving in the EU. With travel restrictions easing in the future, travel issues will require close monitoring to gauge EU Exit impacts.
- 12.6 Mobile roaming has become a re-emerging issue with a number of networks set to introduce roaming in the EU for UK customers. Consumers report feeling that this is a 'cash grab' or an unnecessary charge. This is an area monitored by the Consumer Council with information being published on our website. Consumers can use this to monitor and assess how mobile roaming charges may impact them.
- 12.7 Online shopping habits have been significantly impacted by EU Exit. NI relies heavily on GB as a trading partner, with our research showing that almost two-thirds (65%) of online consumer shopping is being purchased from GB retailers. Some small businesses have reported to consumers that restrictions on movement of goods to NI, or the added processes have caused them to delay or suspend delivery. Delivery restrictions and processes remains an area of debate within EU Exit negotiations.
- 12.8 Cross border shopping habits remain similar to the previous year's research with around one-third saying EU Exit is influencing their likelihood of cross border shopping (11% more likely; 24% less likely).
- 12.9 Our research provides insight into NI consumers' perceptions and experiences of EU Exit one year on. Consumers once again identified 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.

- 12.10 As our research found, the main concern for consumers is the economy of NI, followed by price increases. These issues are becoming increasingly prevalent for consumers as they face the ongoing cost of living crisis with their food, energy, transport costs, and other bills increasing.
- 12.11 Given that NI consumers are less financially resilient to price increases and more economically vulnerable, any impacts to the price, availability or choice of goods are more likely to adversely impact NI consumers. In addition, with the cost of living crisis disproportionately impacting the lowest earners, it is important for the Consumer Council to continue monitoring these price increases and remain aware of upcoming areas of potential detriment.
- 12.12 It is clear that consumers in Northern Ireland continue to face challenges. Negative impacts on consumers must be considered and addressed both now and in the future. 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.
- 12.13 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.
- 12.14 This research was undertaken by Social Market Research (SMR). Both the qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative (surveys) projects were conducted in accordance with SMR's accreditation to ISO20252 international quality standard and adhered to relevant GDPR requirements. The survey consisted of a weighted sample with known population parameters and in line with 2020 census estimates. The results from the survey are accurate within a 95% confidence interval.



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