



Northern Ireland consumers and EU Exit: an overview of EU Exit experiences in 2024

Consumer Council for Northern Ireland

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Executive summary

On 23 June 2016 the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. Following the referendum, EU Exit officially took place on 31 January 2020. Northern Ireland sits in a unique position regarding EU Exit, as it is the only UK member state to share a land border with the EU (Republic of Ireland). This unique position means there are possible areas of divergence for Northern Ireland consumers and how they experience EU Exit.

Over the last four years the Consumer Council has undertaken a programme of research to monitor the impact of EU Exit on Northern Ireland consumers. These reports are published on our website annually and encompass a range of areas such as consumer rights, food availability and affordability, post, travel, energy and shopping. Each year our research has been refined to encompass emerging areas of interest such as EU Exit based delivery issues or mobile roaming. Our research has been based on two elements:

- An online representative survey consisting of around 1,000 participants. These participants were asked about their experiences and opinions across a number of EU Exit related areas. The participants from these studies have been recruited to be demographically representative of the Northern Ireland adult population.
- Online focus groups were also carried out alongside our survey. These focus groups give consumers the opportunity to discuss their experiences of EU Exit in more depth and allows us to capture any emerging issues which may be of concern. A number of focus groups are carried out annually with consumers from each of Northern Ireland's Local Government Districts (LGDs).

This year, the Consumer Council commissioned Cognisense to conduct a survey among a representative sample of the Northern Ireland adult population. A total of 1,000 Northern Ireland consumers participated in the online survey, some of the key findings from which are detailed in this executive summary. For comparative purposes, the corresponding figures from the 2021, 2022 and 2023 surveys have been identified where appropriate. The research also consisted of four qualitative focus groups, the findings from which can be found in the main body of the report.

Consumer rights and concerns

- 49% believed their consumer rights were less well protected as a result of EU Exit, a perception that has increased significantly since 2021 (32%).
- In relation to EU Exit and its potential impact in Northern Ireland, 82% said they would require more information regarding consumer rights and protection as well as more information regarding goods and services (82%). Significant proportions also stated they would require more information regarding food (78%), health (76%) and travel (76%). These priority areas were consistent with those recorded in 2023.

- 56% of Northern Ireland consumers remained concerned following EU Exit. This proportion has dropped from 63% recorded in 2023.
- The top five concerns for consumers relating to EU Exit were price increases, the economy of Northern Ireland, maintaining a frictionless border with the Republic of Ireland, introduction of custom checks and maintaining choice of retailers/products available in Northern Ireland. Over the four years of this research, consumers' top ranking concerns have remained relatively consistent.

General price increases

- 29% claimed general price increases would place a strain on their finances. For others, it would mean having to make cuts elsewhere in their household spend (31%) or having to go without (15%).
- 69% stated EU Exit has had a negative impact on the price of food. Other areas perceived to have been negatively affected included the price of energy (64%), the cost of eating/drinking out (59%) and the price of holidays abroad (54%).
- 49% have experienced an increase in the cost of tradespeople and building materials in 2024. Respondents have also experienced difficulty in finding tradespeople to carry out work (46%) and experienced a reduction in the supply and availability of building materials (46%).

Food shopping

- 78% attributed an increase in the cost of some goods to EU Exit.
- 65% believed EU Exit was responsible for certain goods no longer being available or having to make substitutes due to a lack of availability of some goods (64%).
- 34% claimed food price increases would place a strain on their finances. For others, it would mean having to make cuts elsewhere in their household spend (29%) or having to go without (14%).
- 46% had noticed 'Not for EU' labelling in stores. A further 17% claimed to be aware of the scheme but had not noticed the labelling coming into effect.

Shorter shelf-life of food products

- 53% of consumers had noticed use by dates or shelf-life of products being shorter than usual.
- Consumers believed that a number of items had a shorter shelf-life than usual, in particular raw meats (51%), bread/bakery products (49%), cooked meats (42%) and fresh vegetables (42%).

- 25% of those aware of shorter shelf-lives claimed they spotted these every time they shop. A further 49% spotted these most of the time.
- 34% believed the situation with the shorter shelf-life of products would get worse.
- 85% of those having noticed shorter shelf-lives cited large national supermarkets as the most common retail setting to encounter these. However, this may be due to larger national supermarkets being more frequently used for food shopping.

Travel

- 30% stated that they had checked the issue date on their passport in response to changes resulting from EU Exit. A further 20% had applied for or received an Irish passport.
- 49% cited queues at passport control and 49% cited less favourable exchange rates as the main issues having a negative impact on travel as result of EU Exit. A further 44% also referenced custom checks as an issue when travelling.

Mobile roaming

- 18% of those who had travelled to the EU (including ROI) in the past 12 months claimed to have received an unexpected roaming charge.
- 35% cited this charge as being in excess of £20.

Cross-border shopping

- 55% of those residing in border areas crossed the border on at least a monthly basis to purchase goods. This was significantly higher than the overall average (18%).
- 18% claimed they were less likely to cross the border to purchase goods or services as a result of EU Exit, revealing a decline in 2021 and 2022 trends. (24%).
- 63% of those more likely to cross the border as result of EU Exit were doing so to purchase fuel, revealing an increase on 2023 responses (53%). 59% were doing so to purchase food and drink.

About the Consumer Council

The Consumer Council is the statutory consumer representative body for Northern Ireland, responsible for protecting, empowering consumers and representing consumers, promoting their interests. We operate under our sponsor department, the Department for the Economy (DfE), on behalf of the Northern Ireland Executive.

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.
- Protecting consumers by investigating and resolving consumer complaints under statutory and non-statutory functions.
- Undertaking best practice research to identify and quantify emerging risks to consumers.
- Campaigning for market reform as an advocate for consumer choice, welfare and protection.
- Our statutory powers cover consumer affairs, energy, transport, water and sewerage, postal services and food affordability and accessibility.

These legal responsibilities are drawn from legislation, licences given to companies working in Northern Ireland, and cooperation agreements set in memorandums of understanding. The work we carry out also aligns with a number of the Articles in the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland¹ (NI Protocol).

Our non-statutory functions educate, empower and support consumers against discriminatory practices in any market through advocacy work, as well as education and outreach programmes covering a broad range of topics including promoting consumer rights, financial inclusion and a more sustainable energy future.

We serve Northern Ireland's 1.9 million citizens and champion consumers in everything we do. We prioritise those who are disabled or chronically sick, who are of pensionable age, who are on low incomes and who live in rural areas.

We have responsibilities under the Rural Needs Act 2016 and Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Our aim is to ensure government policies recognise consumer needs in rural areas and promote equality of opportunity and good relations across a range of equality categories.

¹ [Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland](#), House of Commons Library

Introduction and methodology

In January 2020, the UK officially left the EU. Since then, there have been a number of significant developments with implications for Northern Ireland. Such as:

- The beginning of the transition period following the Withdrawal Agreement (February 2020).
- Joint Committee adopts decisions on the Northern Ireland Protocol (December 2020).
- EU-UK Trade Agreement (January 2021).
- The Windsor Framework (February 2023).
- The Windsor Framework Implementation (October 2023).
- The UK Government published a Command Paper 'Safeguarding the Union' which began the process of the return of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive (January 2024).

These milestones are highly significant to the economy of Northern Ireland, with government bills and policies which would outline Northern Ireland's position within the UK and EU and how future trade would be structured.

Over this period, the Consumer Council has conducted annual research on the experience and perceptions of Northern Ireland consumers. This began with our 2021 research report, 'The Northern Ireland Consumer Perspective'². This report provided an overview of consumer experiences of EU Exit at an early stage and helped us understand consumer issues and experiences across a number of our remit areas and work programmes. These included: consumer rights, price increases, food affordability and accessibility, energy, travel, digital services, parcels and online shopping.

Our research has been refined annually to incorporate a number of emerging issues. Our second EU Exit report was published in September 2022, with the fieldwork taking place earlier that year³. This research helped us gauge the early experiences of emerging issues such as changes to mobile roaming, with free roaming within the EU no longer being guaranteed. This informed a separate standalone research project exploring mobile roaming issues and how this impacted Northern Ireland consumers⁴. Another issue explored was retailers who no longer delivered to Northern Ireland due to EU Exit. Retailers no longer delivering to Northern Ireland and general postal issues were highlighted in previous EU Exit research, being a potential issue for a large proportion of Northern Ireland consumers and businesses. Therefore, we chose to conduct a standalone research project which gave a representative overview of consumer experiences when purchasing goods from EU, GB and online marketplace retailers⁵. By conducting research in these areas, as

² [The Northern Ireland Consumer Perspective. An overview: Early perceptions and experiences of EU Exit](#), September 2021, Consumer Council

³ [Northern Ireland Consumer Experience: An overview of EU Exit experiences in 2022](#), September 2022, Consumer Council

⁴ [Mobile Roaming Experiences of Northern Ireland Consumers](#), March 2023, Consumer Council

⁵ [Consumer experiences of retailers not delivering to Northern Ireland](#), July 2024, Consumer Council

they emerge, we are able to inform policymakers on behalf of Northern Ireland consumers.

This report will be the fourth EU Exit report conducted by the Consumer Council since 2021. The fieldwork for this report was conducted in February 2024. At this time, the Safeguarding the Union command paper was being published and elements of the Windsor Framework were yet to be implemented. This report draws on comparisons across the last four years and explores a number of consumer impacts and experiences. The results of this research will provide insight into how consumers' experiences have changed over time, allowing us to monitor experiences as further elements of the Windsor Framework continue to be implemented.

Our previous research reports all indicated that the top concerns for Northern Ireland consumers were the economy and price increases. When this was explored in more detail, consumers stated that their financial resilience was deteriorating each year. Consumers also raised concerns about increased food costs and believed that EU Exit was responsible for a decrease in food affordability and accessibility. Therefore, the current report was written with an emphasis on food affordability and accessibility.

Further food issues were also explored such as consumer shopping behaviours, shorter shelf-life, extending food shelf-life and food storage. However, as these issues were unrelated to EU Exit, the data was used to create a separate standalone report. Our food shopping behaviours and shorter shelf-life report will be published late 2024.

The current report covers the most recent period of research carried out between January and February 2024. This report incorporates and shows annual data from 2021 to 2024. This enables the tracking of changes over time, revealing potential trends and emerging issues.

Research objectives

The Consumer Council commissioned Cognisense to conduct a quantitative and qualitative research programme, the purpose of which was to explore the following topics:

- consumer rights and concerns as a result of EU Exit
- areas where consumers require additional information in relation to EU Exit
- general price increases and financial resilience
- food shopping experiences since EU Exit
- impact on shopping behaviours
- impact on consumer travel as a result of EU Exit
- consumer experiences of mobile roaming over the past 12 months
- cross-border shopping activity

Methodology

An online quantitative survey of 1,000 Northern Ireland residents was conducted in January 2024. During survey fieldwork, quota controls were implemented based on official population estimates and corrective RIM weighting was used during data analysis to ensure the final sample was representative of the Northern Ireland population.

This research also consisted of four focus groups (eight respondents in each), which were conducted in February 2024. These qualitative focus groups were comprised of respondents from a mix of demographic backgrounds as well as respondents residing across all 11 LGDs (Table 1). This qualitative research allowed for a clearer and additional understanding of the actual and perceived issues consumers are experiencing as a result of EU Exit.

Technical notes

There were four focus groups split across Northern Ireland's demographic profiles. All groups included a diverse mix of age profiles, both urban and rural residents and participants in all groups were either solely or jointly responsible for food shopping in the household. All groups also contained one respondent with a disability. The groups consisted of:

- Group one, who were from the ABC1 socio-economic background. The participants were from the LGDs of Antrim and Newtownabbey, Ards and North Down and Belfast.
- Group two, who were from the C2DE socio-economic background. The participants were from the LGDs of Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon, Fermanagh and Omagh, Mid Ulster and Belfast.
- Group three, who were from the C2DE socio-economic background. The participants were from the LGDs of Lisburn and Castlereagh, Mid and East Antrim, Causeway Coast and Glens and Belfast.
- Group four, who were from the ABC1 socio-economic background. The participants were from the LGDs of Derry City and Strabane, Newry Mourne and Down and Belfast.

Where differences by demographics have been referenced, these have been tested at the 95% confidence level.

As a result of the rounding of figures or the use of questions for which multiple answers could have been given, the sums on charts may not always total 100%.

Socio-economic group (SEG) is a means of classifying respondents based on the employment status, occupation and working pattern (full-time/part-time) of the head of household. There are six socio-economic grades: A, B, C1, C2, D and E. For analysis purposes, these grades have been combined into the following groups: 'ABC1' (more affluent consumers) and 'C2DE' (less affluent consumers).

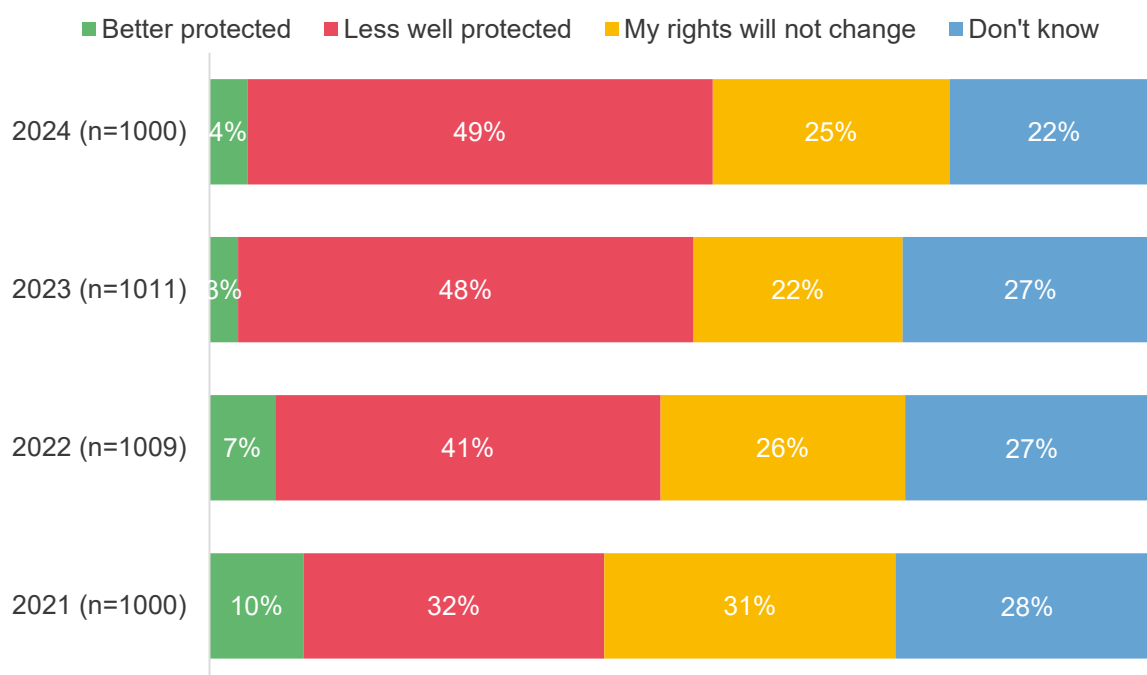
Where possible, trends have been compared against previous research waves conducted in 2021 (n=1,000), 2022 (n=1009) and 2023 (n=1,000).

Consumer rights and concerns

Perceived impact on consumer rights following EU Exit

Almost half (49%) of respondents believed their consumer rights were less well protected as a result of exiting the EU, a perception that has increased significantly since 2021 (32%). A quarter (25%) felt that their rights would not change, with 4% claiming their rights were better protected. Just over a fifth (22%) stated they did not know how their consumer rights were being impacted (Figure 1).

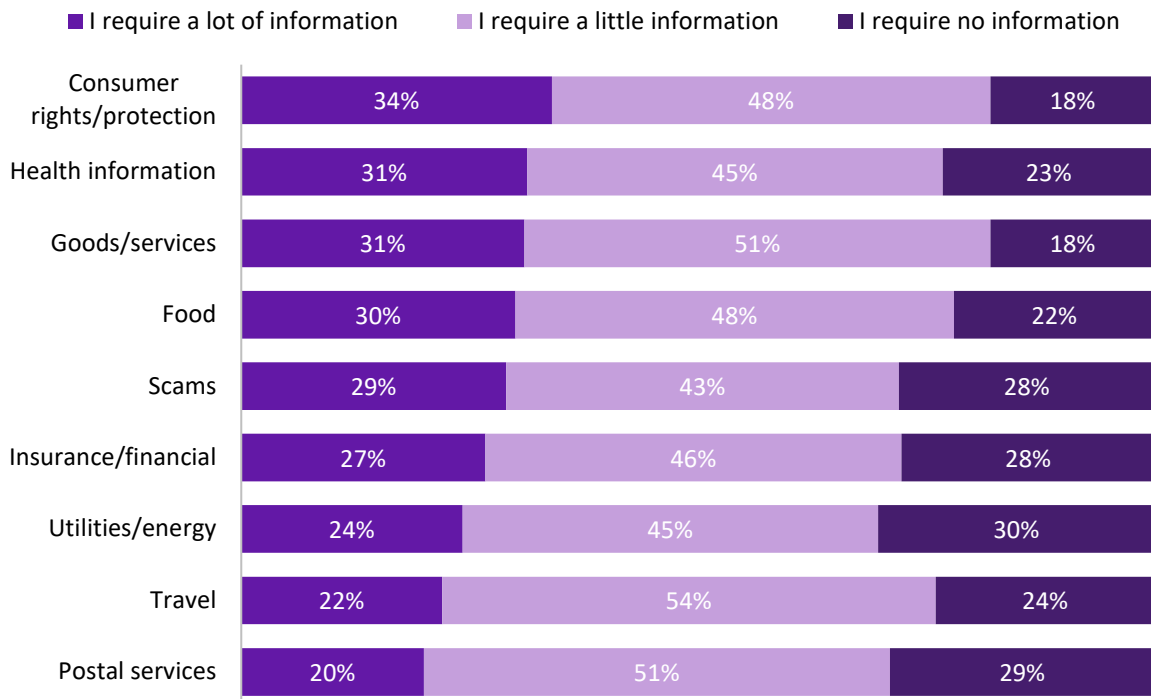
Figure 1: Having left the EU, how do you feel your consumer rights are being impacted? (n=1,000)



Extent of information required in relation to EU Exit

Over four in five consumers required more information regarding consumer rights and protection (82%) and goods and services (82%). Significant proportions also required more information regarding food (78%), health (76%) and travel (76%) (Figure 2). These priority areas were consistent with those recorded in 2023.

Figure 2: In relation to EU Exit and its potential impact in Northern Ireland, to what extent do you require information for each of the following? (n=1,000)



It was evident from our qualitative research that consumers desired more information and detail around the potential impacts of EU Exit and what difference it would make to their everyday lives. There was a great deal of scepticism around the ‘spin’ that was used by politicians and commentators on both sides of the debate. Consumers were in need of a balanced assessment free from political bias.

‘I wish someone could just tell us how it is.’

‘All these guys on the TV are just trying to protect their own interests and win votes. They’re not interested in the average punter.’

‘All you hear is argument and counter argument.’

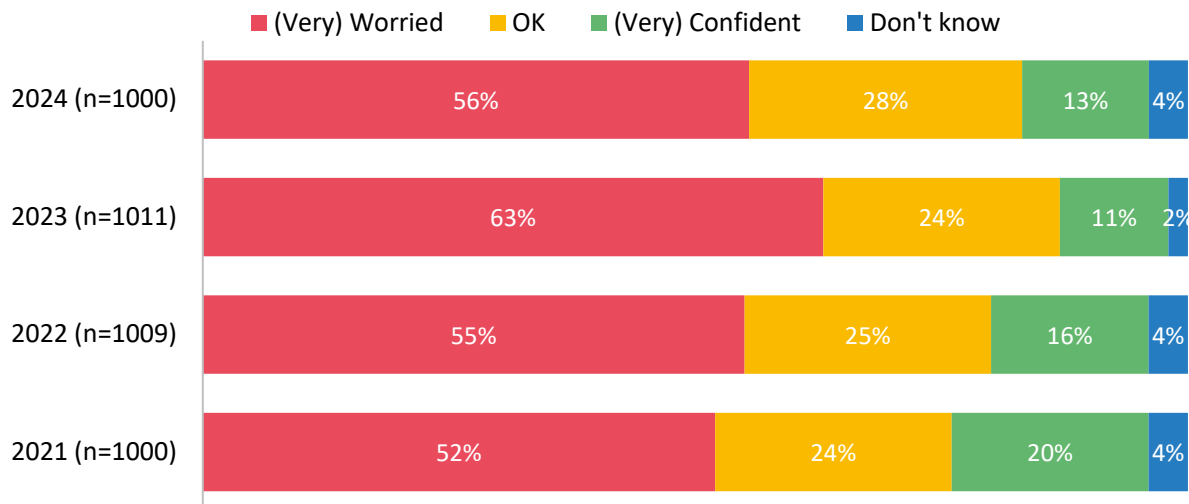
‘I think the main problem is that government don’t know how things are going to unfold. We’ve been out of the EU for three or four years now and it is still problem after problem.’

‘I’m convinced the powers that be don’t want us to know.’

Consumer sentiment following EU Exit

Almost three in five (56%) Northern Ireland consumers felt concerned following EU Exit. This proportion has dropped back from 63% recorded in 2023. Over a quarter (28%) claimed they were feeling ok, whereas over one in ten (13%) felt confident now that we have left the EU (Figure 3).

Figure 3: As a Northern Ireland consumer, how do you feel now that we have left the EU? (n=1,000)



In our qualitative research, it was still apparent that the majority of consumers were worried about the potential impacts of EU Exit. However, for some consumers, the return of Stormont did suggest that things would improve.

'I have to say I am worried for the future, as we just don't know what's going to happen.'

'Yes, I'm worried for the economy, my job and keeping a household running.'

'In truth, I'm fed up with all the talk about it. The last two years haven't helped.'

'Now that lot are back on the hill, maybe we can stop arguing over the Protocol and get things moving.'

Ranked EU Exit concerns by year

The research also asked consumers to rank their concerns relating to EU Exit. The top concerns were price increases, the economy of Northern Ireland, maintaining a frictionless border with the Republic of Ireland (ROI), introduction of custom checks and maintaining choice of retailers/products available in Northern Ireland. Over the four survey years, consumer-ranked concerns have remained relatively consistent.

There were four years in which consumers were asked to rank their concerns regarding EU Exit. In order by year these concerns were as follows:

- 2021 ranked concerns were: Price increases, economy of Northern Ireland, maintaining a frictionless border with ROI, reduction of choice of retailers/products available in Northern Ireland, introduction of tariffs on goods sourced outside of Northern Ireland, introduction of custom checks, longer delivery times, reduction in quality of food standards, reduction in product safety standards and reduction of consumer protections.
- 2022 ranked concerns were: Economy of Northern Ireland, price increases, maintaining a frictionless border with ROI, introduction of customs checks, maintaining choice of retailers/products available in Northern Ireland, maintaining quality of food standards, introduction of tariffs on goods sourced outside of Northern Ireland, maintaining product and safety standards, longer delivery times, maintaining consumer protections.
- 2023 ranked concerns were: Economy of Northern Ireland, price increases, maintaining a frictionless border with ROI, maintaining choice of retailers/products available in Northern Ireland, introduction of tariffs on goods sourced outside Northern Ireland, introduction of custom checks, maintaining quality of food standards, longer delivery times, maintaining product safety and standards, maintaining consumer protections.
- 2024 ranked concerns were: Price increases, economy of Northern Ireland, maintaining a frictionless border with ROI, introduction of custom checks, maintaining choice of retailers/products available in Northern Ireland, maintaining quality of food standards, maintaining product safety and standards, introduction of tariffs on goods sourced outside Northern Ireland, maintaining consumer protections, longer delivery times.

The qualitative research revealed that, for many, concerns were driven by a lack of political stability in Northern Ireland and how the return of Stormont would unfold. As with previous research, many consumers were unable to coherently express what the risks were beyond a general sense of apprehension and uncertainty.

The main talking points for consumers revolved around price increases, the cost of living and concerns about the Northern Ireland economy. Although EU Exit was not generally regarded as solely responsible for these issues, it was considered a contributor alongside the impacts of COVID-19 and conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East.

'The problems we are experiencing since Brexit don't look as if they are going to end any time soon. For several years now people have been suffering increased costs and there's no sign of it stopping.'

'The first priority has to be to get prices stabilised just so that we can all survive. My salary is not going up at the same rate as prices.'

'Maybe now that power sharing is back, it might help the local economy. I think that's our only hope.'

'People are just tired of the uncertainty of what's going to happen next.'

'Brexit started this whole thing off, but other things haven't helped, like the war in Ukraine and Covid. It's like the perfect storm.'

'Surely the hike in gas and petrol was more to do with Ukraine than Brexit.'

'Covid was to blame for some things too.'

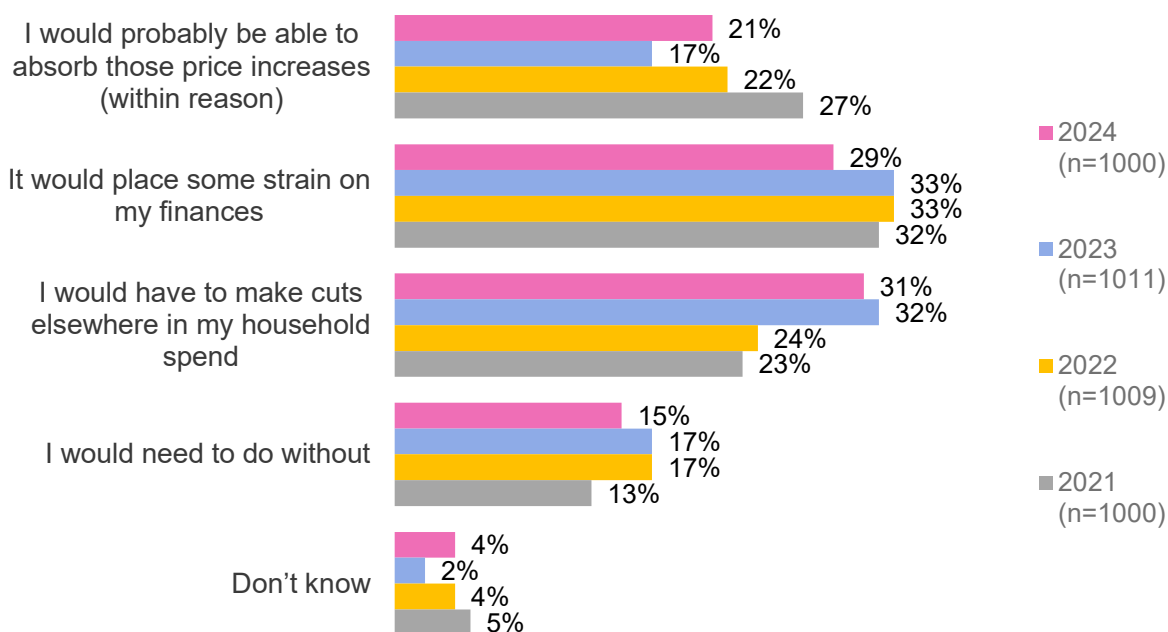
'No Stormont for 2 years so nothing was sorted out.'

General price increases

Impact on personal finances if general prices rise due to EU Exit

Just over one in five (21%) consumers said they would be able to absorb price increases related to EU Exit, revealing a slight uplift on 2023 trends (17%). Despite this, there remained a significant proportion of consumers that claimed price increases would place strain on their finances (29%). Others stated that they would have to make cuts elsewhere in their household spend (31%) or have to go without (15%).

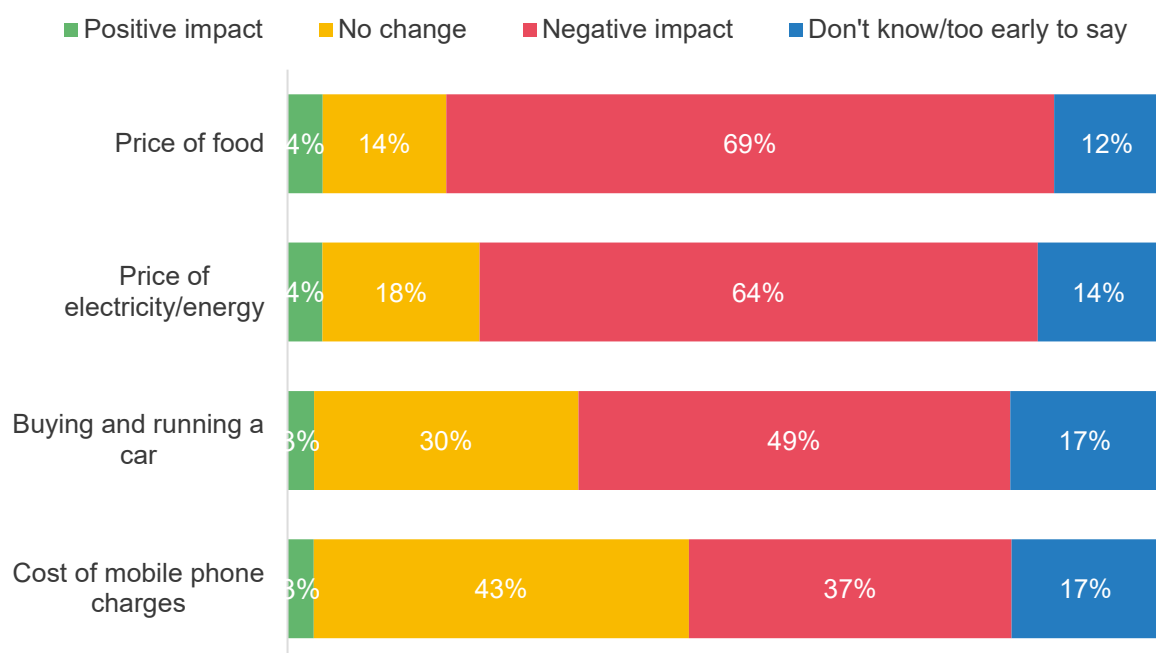
Figure 4: If prices in general were to rise as a result of our exit from the EU, what impact would this have on your finances? (n=1,000)



Perceived impact of EU Exit on common personal expenditures

Consumers felt that EU Exit had a negative impact on a number of areas, such as the cost of basics. Areas where consumers expressed this negative impact was with the price of food (69%), the price of energy (64%), buying and running a car (49%) and the cost of mobile phone charges (37%) (Figure 5).

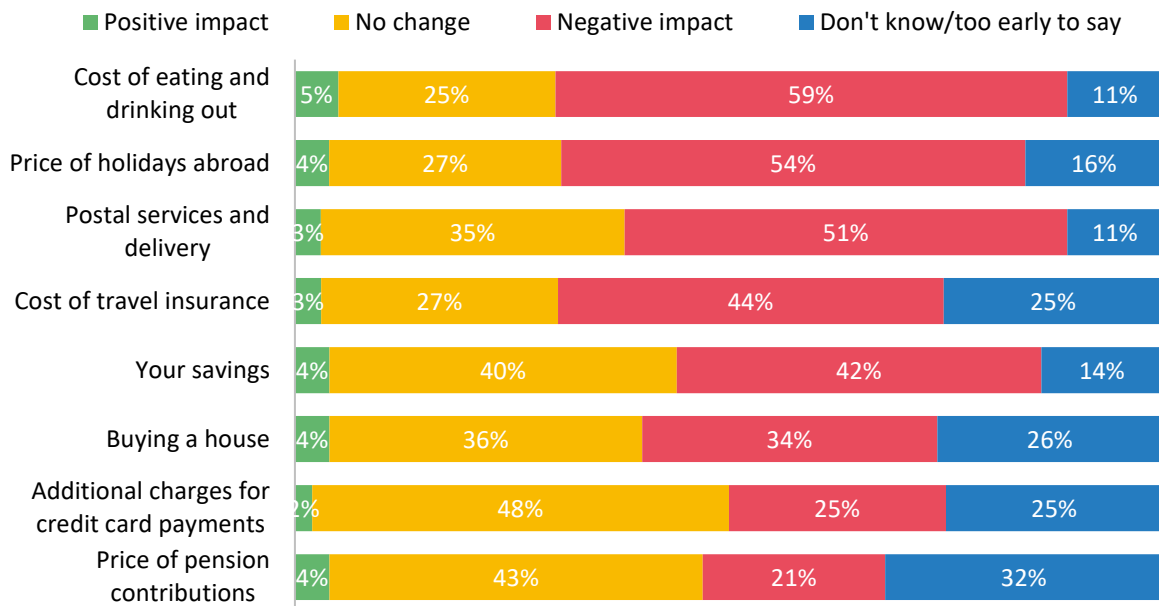
Figure 5: What impact, if any do you think leaving the EU has had on you in relation to the following items? (n=1,000)



When considering other costs, the cost of eating and drinking out (59%), the price of holidays abroad (54%) and postal services and delivery (51%) were also notably perceived as being negatively impacted by EU Exit (Figure 6).

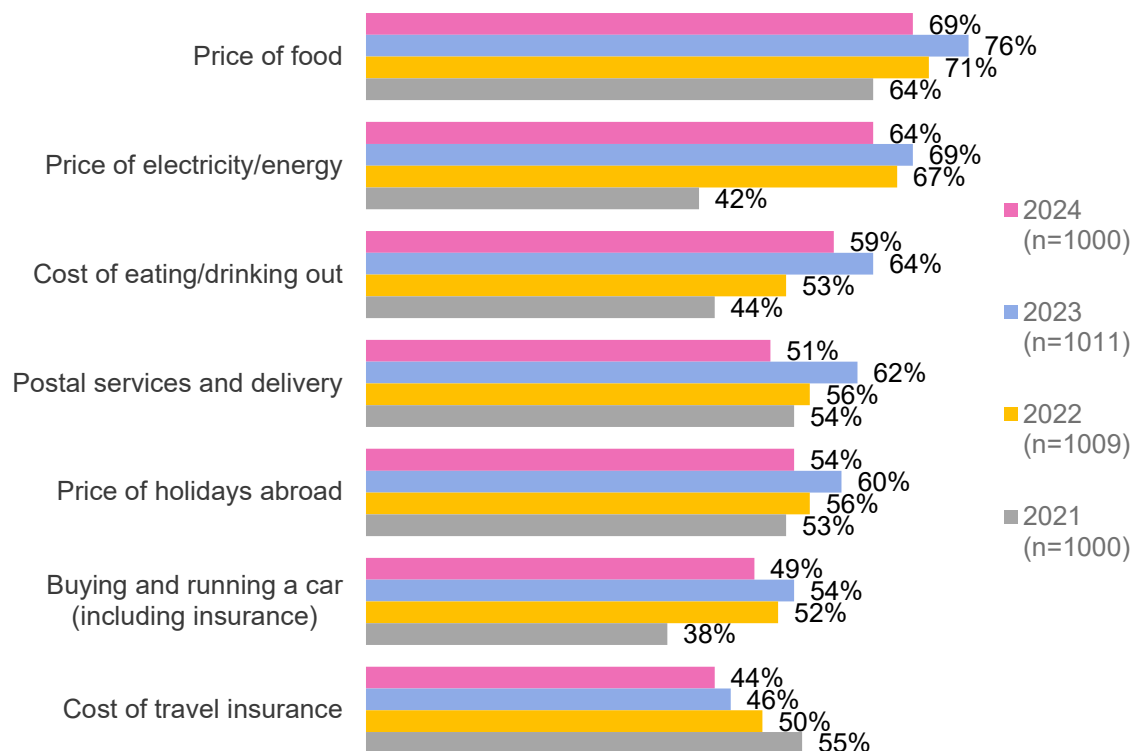
Those in the younger 18-24 (62%) and 25-34 (45%) age groups were significantly more likely to state that buying a house had been negatively impacted by EU Exit, compared to all consumers (34%).

Figure 6: What impact, if any do you think leaving the EU has had on you in relation to the following items? (Other costs) (n=1,000)



Those areas perceived to have a greater negative impact were similar to those cited over the previous three years of tracking. However, it is worth noting that the levels of negative impact across these main areas have declined between 2023 and 2024 (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Perceived negative impact of EU Exit on common personal expenditures



The qualitative research supported the belief that EU Exit was having a negative impact on the majority of consumers. Although, as referenced previously, other factors were also regarded as having an influence. The price of food, energy and eating out were continuously cited as common expenditures most effected by EU Exit.

'Prices have gone up so much. Groceries have doubled.'

'I put on extra clothes before the heating.'

'If you are fit to get out of the house you are better being out and not having to have the heating on.'

'My last online grocery delivery was over £170. I can remember when I used to be able to keep it under £100.'

'I'm spending £70 a week on gas to heat the house. That is over twice what it used to cost me.'

'The price of electricity is frightening. Wasn't like this before Brexit.'

'Everything has gone up. You name it, food, electricity, drink, insurance, building materials, interest rates.'

'Because you can't get certain products now because of Brexit, those that are available are dearer as they know people are desperate.'

'We simply don't have luxuries anymore. It's the only way we can afford to keep going. Can't remember the last time we went out.'

'Treats at the weekends have had to stop in our house.'

'Petrol goes up and down and up and down.'

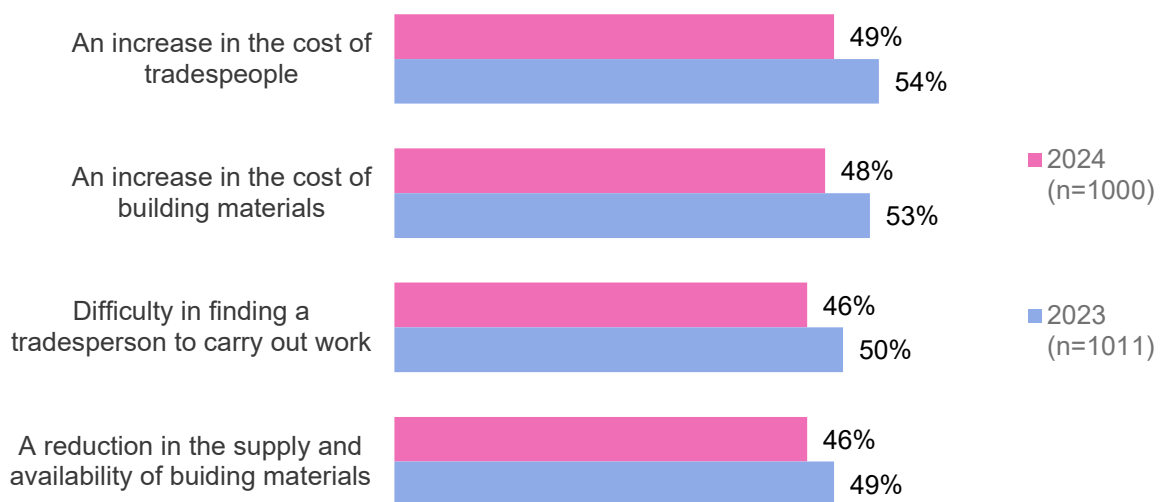
'Locally produced things like bread and milk have gone up so surely that is not down to Brexit?'

'Is petrol more to do with Ukraine?'

Building work

Almost half of consumers have experienced an increase in the cost of tradespeople (49%) and building materials (48%), which they attributed to EU Exit. Slightly lower proportions experienced a reduction in the availability of materials (46%) and difficulty in finding tradespeople to conduct work (46%), which they perceived was the result of EU Exit. These trends have declined slightly since 2023 (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Please indicate if you have experienced any of the following which you believe have been caused by leaving the EU (n=1,000)



Food shopping

Food shopping experiences since EU Exit

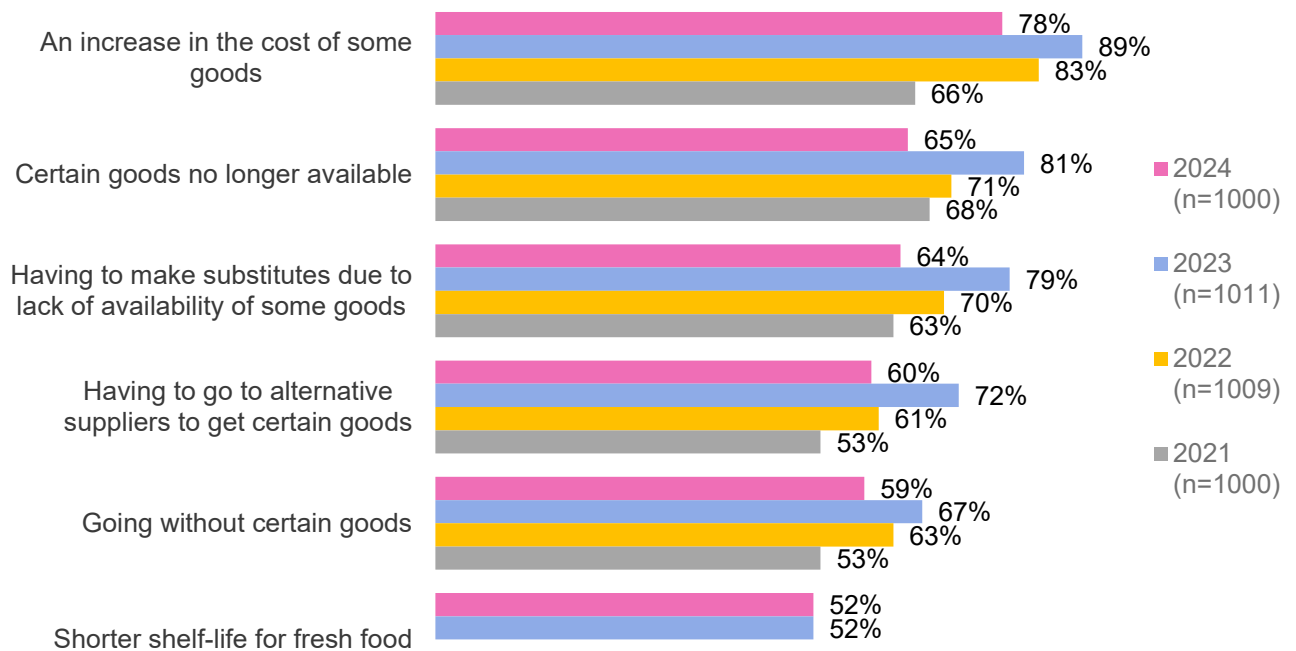
Food has continued to be one of the most significant issues for consumers since 2021, when this programme of research began. Food price increases have been a large area of concern for consumers, with price increases being a contributor to increasing financial detriment. In previous research, consumers reported shorter shelf-life of food products and having to shop more frequently, or elsewhere, for better use-by dates. As these issues have previously been attributed to EU Exit (as well as a number of other causes), this year's research placed a greater emphasis on issues relating to consumers' food shopping behaviours and experiences.

Where consumer food shopping behaviours and experiences were not attributable to EU Exit, the data was used to compile a separate standalone report. This standalone report describes shopping behaviours, experiences of shorter shelf-life and extending the shelf-life of products. This report will be published late 2024.

Food shopping experiences believed to be caused by leaving the EU

Almost four in five (78%) consumers attributed an increase in the cost of some goods to EU Exit. Just under two-thirds (65%) blamed EU Exit for certain goods no longer being available or having to make substitutes due to a lack of availability of some goods (64%). Despite significant increases in negative experiences over recent years, trends in 2024 dropped back to relatively similar levels to those recorded in 2022 (Figure 9). Remaining consistent with 2023 trends, over half (52%) of consumers reported noticing a shorter shelf-life for fresh food. Please note, noticing shorter shelf-life was an emerging issue and added to our 2023 survey. Therefore, we have no data for shorter shelf-life prior to 2023.

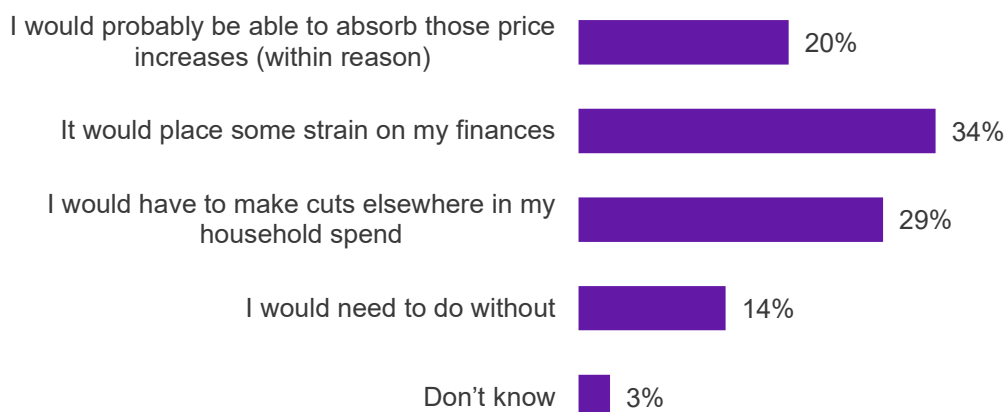
Figure 9: Have you experienced any of the following which you believe have been caused by leaving the EU? (n=1,000)



Impact on personal finances if food prices rise due to EU Exit

One in five (20%) consumers said they would be able to absorb food price increases related to EU Exit. Despite this, there remained significant proportions of consumers that claimed price increases would place strain on their finances (34%), they would have to make cuts elsewhere in their household spend (29%) or they would need to do without (14%).

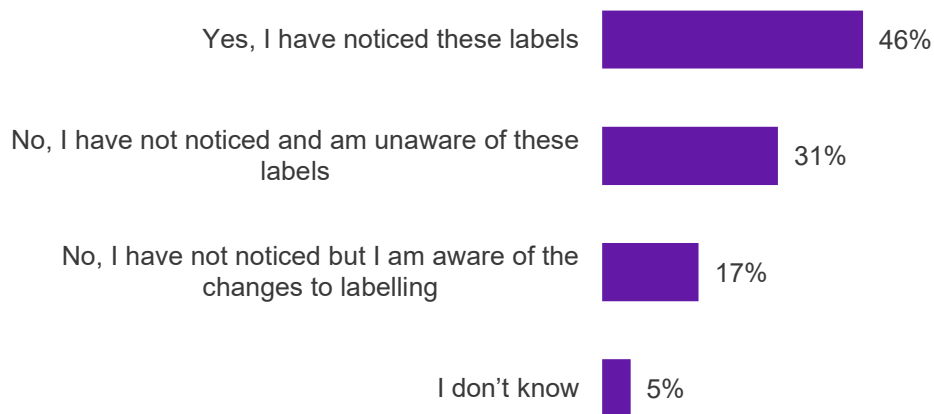
Figure 10: If food prices rise as a result of our exit from the EU, what impact would this have on your finances? (n=1,000)



Noticed ‘Not for EU’ labelling on products and posters in store

Under half of consumers (46%) had noticed ‘Not for EU’ labelling in stores. Almost one in five (17%) claimed to be aware of the scheme but had not noticed the labelling coming into effect.

Figure 11: Have you noticed the ‘Not for EU’ labelling on products and posters in store? (n=1,000)



The focus groups revealed there was a notable lack of awareness and understanding around the need for ‘Not for EU’ labelling in stores. Respondents tended to make assumptions that the labelling was linked to the Northern Ireland Protocol and issues around the flow of goods within the UK internal market. However, few were able to elaborate in any detail. For many, the labels were largely ignored as they didn’t have any direct impact on their shopping experience.

Others regarded the labelling as something that was more relevant to those running businesses or residing close to the border. Consumers were unable to draw any meaningful links between the labelling and an impact on the price or quality.

‘No clue what it means. Makes no difference to me.’

It’s clearly got something to do with Brexit, but don’t know what.’

‘Does it mean the quality is not good enough for the EU? Maybe less checks for non-EU countries.’

‘I think it’s just a legal requirement.’

‘I’ve seen it on the front door of the local shop. I think it’s for legal reasons.’

‘It’s about food having different rules and regulations.’

‘Not that interested to be honest, more worried about the price.’

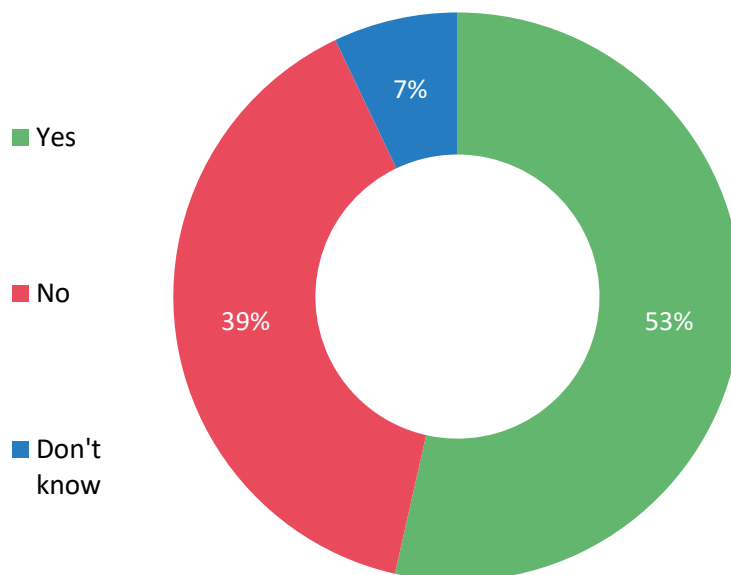
'It's so that these goods can't cross the border and be sold in the EU.'

'These labels are only relevant to shop keepers and customers that live in border areas like Newry and Derry.'

Awareness of shorter shelf-life

Over half (53%) of consumers had noticed use-by dates or shelf-lives of products becoming shorter than usual. This was consistent with awareness in 2023 (52%). In contrast, almost two in five (39%) were unaware of this happening, leaving 7% who were unsure.

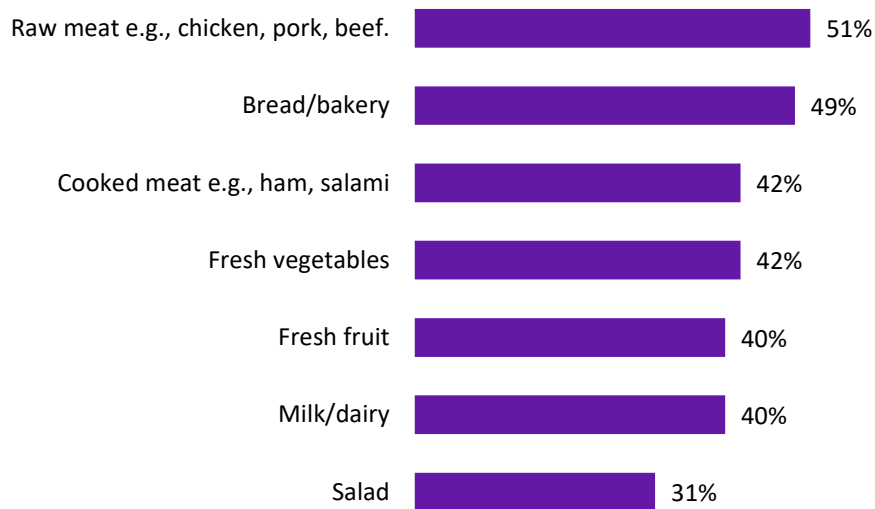
Figure 12: Have you noticed use-by dates/shelf-lives becoming shorter than usual? (n=1,000)



Food categories with shorter shelf-lives

Those food categories that were most frequently cited as having shorter shelf-lives than usual included raw meat products (51%), bread and bakery products (49%), cooked meats (42%) and fresh vegetables (42%) (Figure 13).

Figure 13: What food categories, if any, have you noticed having a shorter shelf-life/quicker perishability? (n=526)



Consumers were also asked to state, in an open question, what specific food items they had noticed having the shortest shelf-life. A quarter (25%) made reference to bread, with smaller proportions citing milk (12%), fruit (11%), chicken (11%) and ham (9%).

Regularity of noticing shorter use-by dates on products

Amongst those consumers who said they were aware of shorter use-by dates on products, a quarter (25%) claimed they noticed this every time they shop. Just under half (49%) claimed they spotted this most of the time, with a further quarter (25%) noticing once in a while (Figure 14).

Figure 14: How often do you notice products with a shorter use-by date/quicker perishability? (n=526)



Perceptions on whether shelf-life dates will improve or get worse

Of those consumers who are aware of shorter shelf-lives, over a third (34%) believed that the situation with shorter shelf-life of products would get worse over time, compared to 15% who felt that things would improve. Just over a quarter (27%) were of the opinion that things would remain the same as they are.

Amongst respondents taking part in the qualitative research, there was a sense of frustration about shorter use-by dates on products. The general sentiment was that consumers were not only having to pay more for food, but also, they now had less time to use the product before it perished. Consumers expressed shorter shelf-life as becoming more common, rather than an occasional occurrence. Consumers experienced shorter shelf-life across a range of products, which appeared to be more prevalent in large supermarkets compared to smaller local outlets.

There was limited understanding as to why perishability issues were happening. However, many assumed this was directly linked to EU Exit and potential delays on produce entering Northern Ireland. Few respondents believed this situation would improve in the future, or at least until trade and transportation became more seamless between the EU, Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

‘It drives me mad having to throw food out, but I seem to be doing it more and more these days.’

‘Food now costs more, and we have less time to eat it.’

‘I find myself running to the shops several times a week just so I can get fruit and veg with a good date on it.’

‘I just find things don’t last as long anymore so you can’t buy for a week without having to throw some fresh stuff out.’

‘Hate waste so only buy for few days at a time.’

‘It happens all the time now. You need to be on your toes every time you go into a shop.’

‘Surely, it’s because it’s now taking longer for them to get the food onto our shelves. It’s probably sitting in a container for an extra few days to meet all these checks.’

‘Seems to be a bigger problem in the larger supermarkets. I think the smaller ones are more inclined to buy local.’

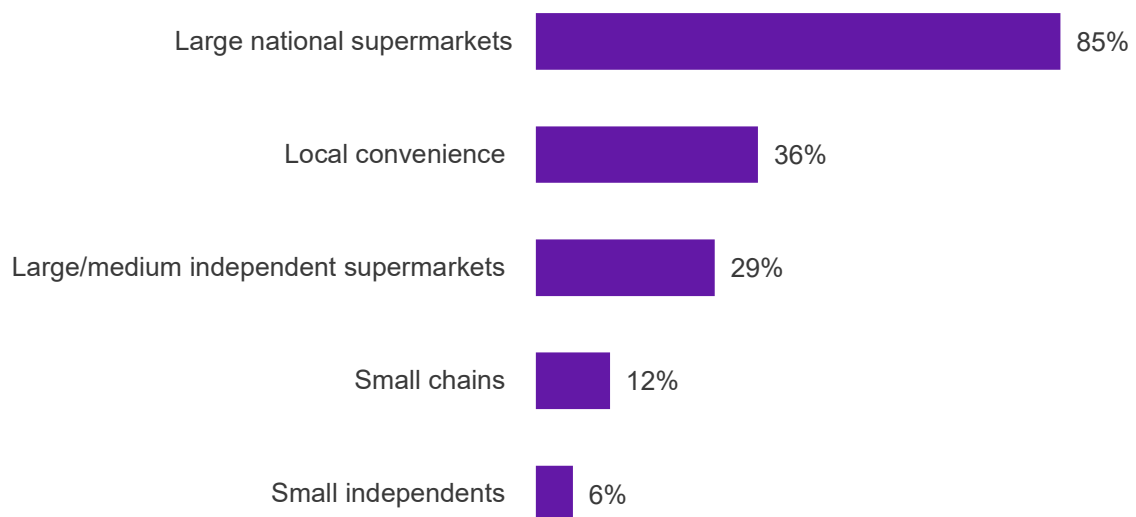
‘Our local butcher stuff seems to be better quality and lasts longer so I go there more than I would have years ago. Bit more expensive but worth it.’

‘The fruit and vegetables from the farm shop definitely last longer and I think it tastes nicer.’

Retail settings where shorter shelf-life of products was encountered

Consumers had most frequently encountered issues with shorter shelf-life of products in large national supermarkets (85%). Fewer consumers referenced local convenience stores (36%), independent supermarkets (29%), small chains (12%) and small independents (6%) (Figure 15). However, this may be due to consumers shopping more frequently, or purchasing a larger range of goods at large supermarkets compared to smaller outlets.

Figure 15: In which retail setting(s) have you encountered issues with products having a shorter shelf-life/quicker perishability? (n=526)



Further information on food shopping behaviours, shorter shelf-life and extending shelf-life can be found in our research titled "Consumers' experiences of behaviours related to shorter shelf-life and food perishability" which will be published in late 2024.

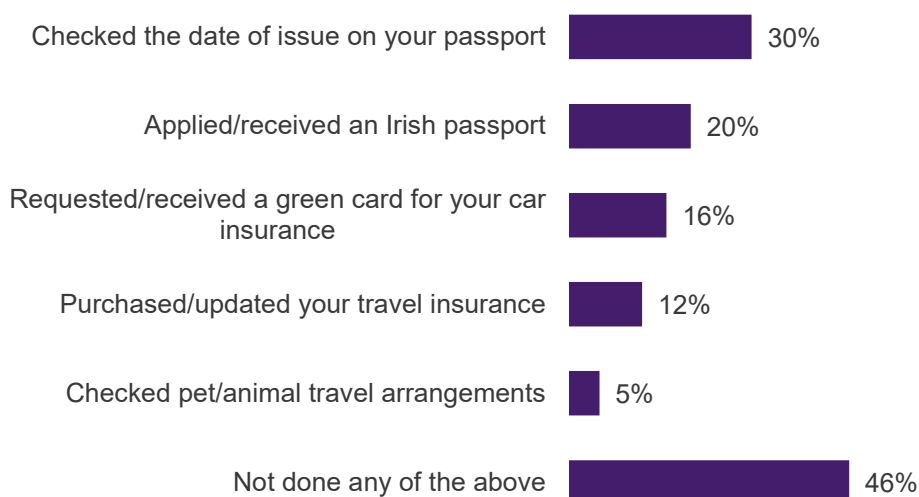
In addition, the Consumer Council commissioned research to look at the challenges facing those involved at every stage of the supply chain of short shelf-life produce. This technical report, and a consumer-friendly version will be published in late 2024. This report sets out potential solutions and recommendations to address the issues encountered.

Travel

Preparations made in response to changes resulting from EU Exit

In response to changes resulting from EU Exit, three in ten consumers (30%) had checked the issue date on their passport, with one in five (20%) having applied for or received an Irish passport (Figure 16). Under half (46%) of respondents report having made no preparations in response to EU Exit related travel changes.

Figure 16: Have you made any of the following preparations or arrangements due to EU Exit? (n=1,000)

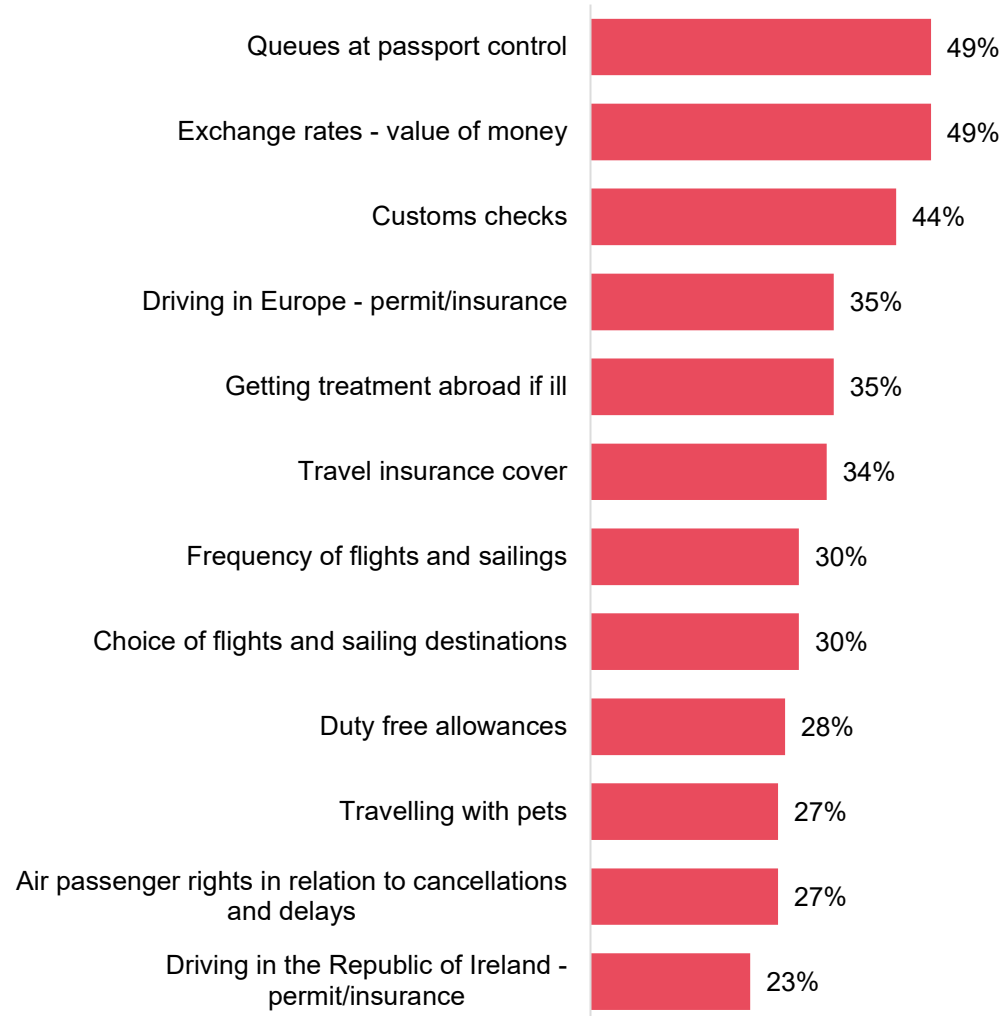


Perceived impact of EU Exit on aspects of travel to and from Northern Ireland

As with previous surveys, the current findings highlight that as a result of EU Exit, consumers regarded queues at passport control (49%), exchange rates - value for money (49%), and custom checks (44%) as travel issues that have been negatively impacted.

Despite this, it should be noted that the prevalence of negativity around most of these issues has declined since the 2023 survey.

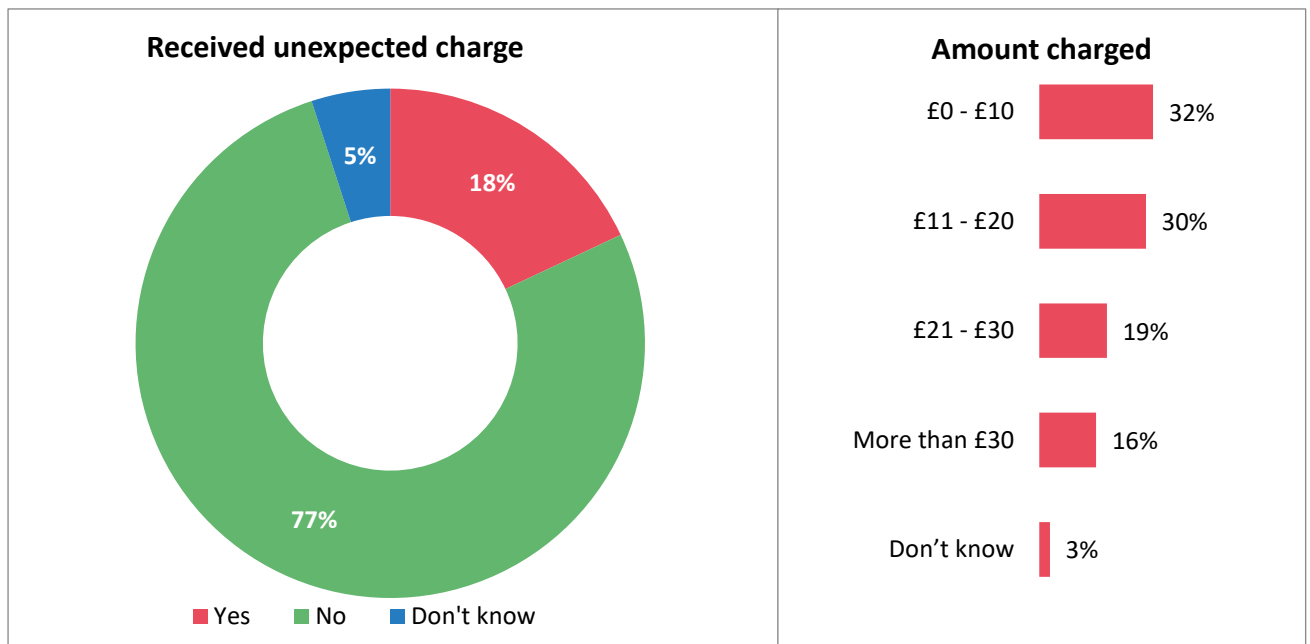
Figure 17: Perceived negative impact leaving the EU has had on each of the following aspects of travel to and from Northern Ireland? (n=1,000)



Mobile roaming - Travelled to the EU (including ROI)

Almost three in five (59%) respondents had travelled to the EU (including ROI) over the previous 12 month period. Of these respondents, almost a fifth (18%) claimed they had received an unexpected roaming charge. For over a third (35%) this charge was estimated to be in excess of £20 (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Have you received an unexpected bill or charge for roaming when travelling to the EU (including ROI) in the last 12 months? (n=630) If so, how much? (n=116)

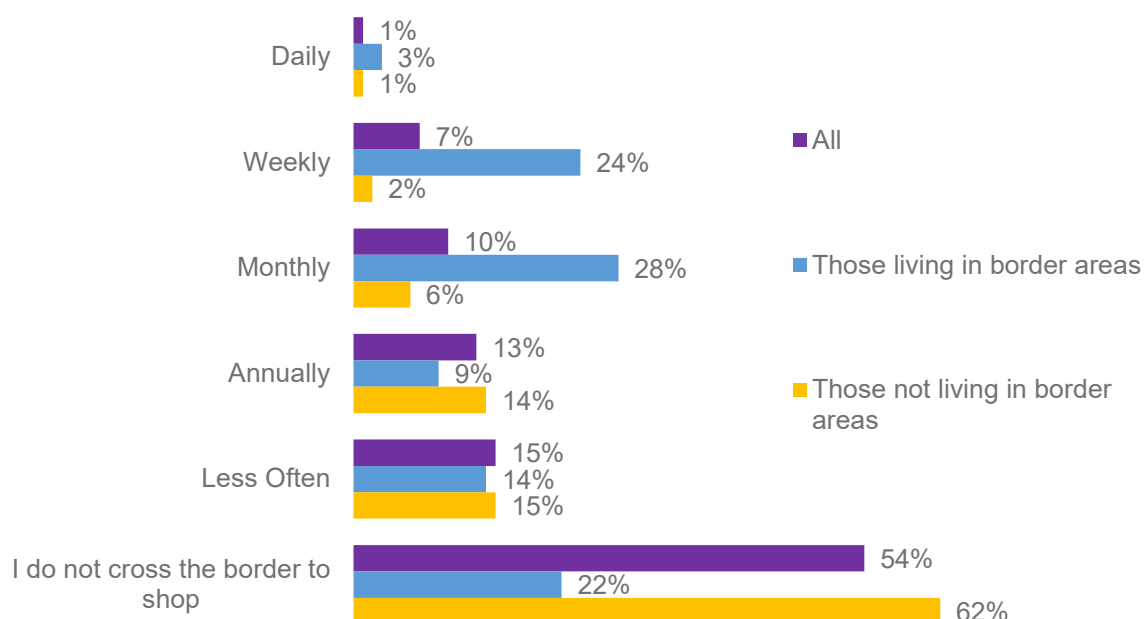


Cross-border shopping

Frequency of crossing the border to shop

Almost one in five consumers (18%) crossed the border on at least a monthly basis to purchase goods, whilst over half (54%) did not cross the border to shop. (Figure 19).

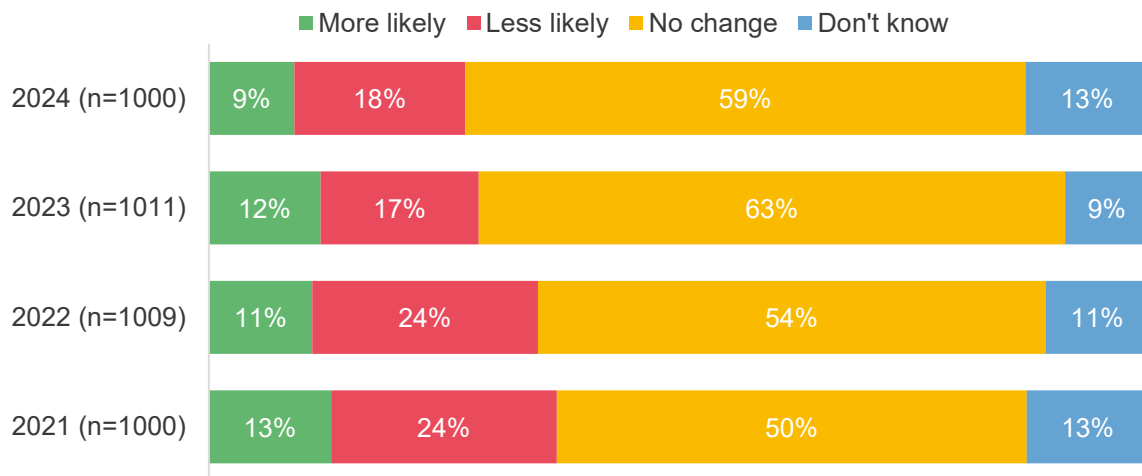
Figure 19: How frequently, if at all, do you cross the border to purchase goods? (n=1,000)



Crossing the border to shop as a result of EU Exit

As a result of EU Exit, almost one in five consumers (18%) claimed they were less likely to cross the border to purchase goods or services, a trend that has declined since 2021 (24%). Around a tenth (9%) of consumers suggested they would be more likely to cross the border to shop. For the majority (59%), exiting the EU had no impact on their decision to travel cross-border to purchase goods or services (Figure 20).

Figure 20: 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 (ROI)? (n=1,000)

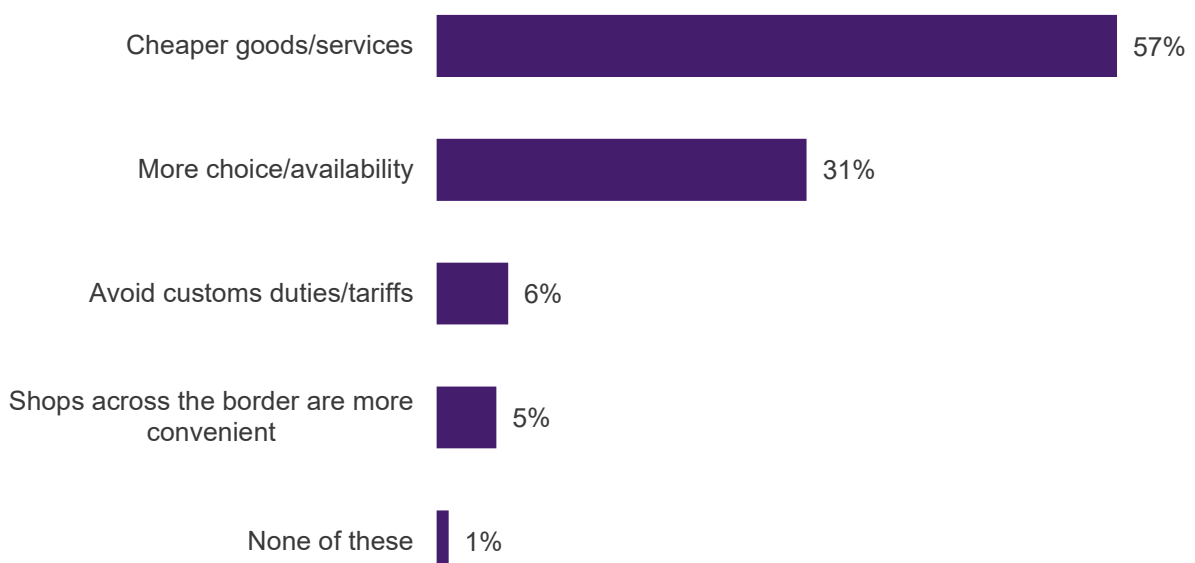


Reasons more likely to cross the border to shop

Amongst those consumers more likely to cross the border to shop, their main motivation was to purchase cheaper goods and services (57%) and to access greater choice and availability of products and services (31%) (Figure 21).

The desire to seek cheaper goods and services cross-border was significantly higher amongst lower income C2DE households (73%) compared to ABC1's (45%).

Figure 21: Why are you more likely to cross the border to shop? (n=95)



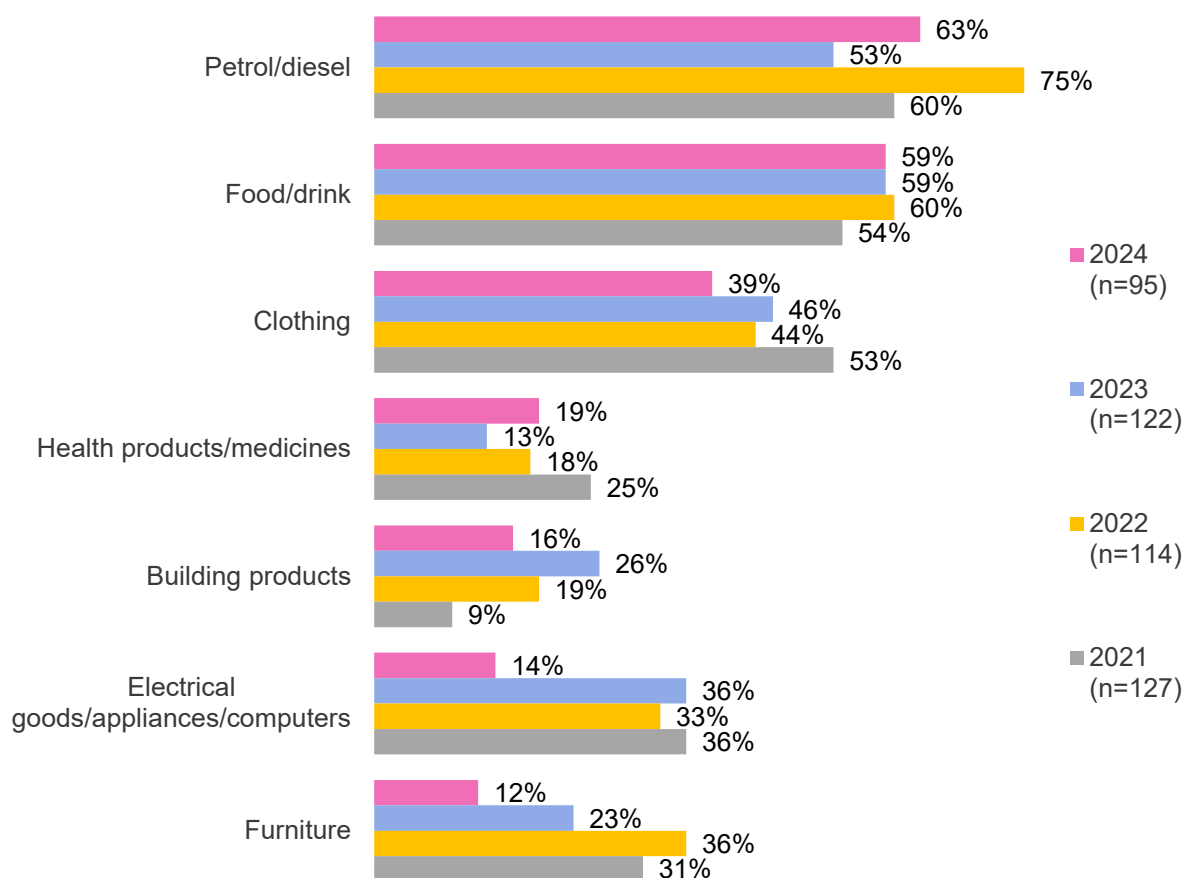
Goods or services people are more likely to cross the border to purchase

In the 2024 survey, petrol and diesel (63%) and food and drink (59%) were the most common items consumers were more likely to cross the border to purchase.

Since the 2023 survey, there has been a notable fall in the number of consumers saying they are likely to cross the border to purchase clothing (down from 46% in 2023 to 39% in 2024); building products (down from 26% in 2023 to 16% in 2024); electrical goods (down from 36% in 2023 to 14% in 2024) and furniture (down from 23% in 2023 to 12% in 2024).

Notable increases since 2023 were in the likely purchase of petrol and diesel (up from 53% in 2023 to 63% in 2024) and health products and medicines (up from 13% in 2023 to 19% in 2024) (Figure 22).

Figure 22: What goods/services, if any, would you now be more likely to cross the border to purchase? (n=95)



Conclusions

The research programme continues to reveal insights into consumer experiences and perceptions since EU Exit. Consumers have identified a range of issues they regard as being the result of EU Exit, many of which have remained prevalent since 2021.

There are an increasing proportion of consumers who believe that their consumer rights are less well protected following EU Exit, rising from 32% in 2021 to 49% in 2024. As a result, the vast majority require more information. Consumers wish this information to be free from bias across issues such as consumer rights, health, goods and services, and food. While the majority of consumers (56%) continue to be worried following EU Exit this area has decreased from 2023.

The main concern facing consumers continues to be price increases. For the vast majority, general price rises will have a detrimental impact on household expenditure, resulting in numerous consumers having to make cuts elsewhere or go without. Other issues of concern included the economy of Northern Ireland and maintaining a frictionless border with ROI. These concerns have been consistent since 2021. Through the qualitative research, there was evidence to suggest that some were slightly more optimistic now that Stormont and power sharing have resumed and that this may have a positive effect on the local economy.

As a result of EU Exit, negative impacts were being felt across a range of common personal expenditures, such as the price of food, the price of energy, the cost of eating/drinking out and the price of holidays abroad. However, these negative impacts have declined slightly in 2024 and may have been at a peak height in 2023 due to other contributing factors. Factors such as COVID-19 issues, the conflict in Ukraine and the Middle East or the cost of living crisis, which were all seen as contributing to price increases and financial hardship.

The majority of consumers (54%) had not noticed 'Not for EU' labels or posters when shopping in stores. There was a lack of understanding as to the need and relevance of the scheme, as the consumer mindset was clearly focused on price and availability. There was a general sense that the scheme had made little or no impact on their shopping experience.

Over half of consumers (53%) had noticed shelf-life becoming shorter than usual, a trend which had become a common occurrence rather than an occasional one, especially in the larger retail outlets. This was creating a great deal of frustration amongst consumers, who generally felt they were having to pay more for products, but now had less time to consume them. Again, there was limited understanding as to why this was happening. Many assumed this was directly linked to EU Exit and potential delays on produce entering Northern Ireland.

For the vast majority, checking use-by dates in stores had become a necessity, with consumers regularly hunting the shelves for better dates. Given the cost of living pressures and the need to reduce food waste, consumers regarded this as especially important. Although this was an issue for all consumers, it was most commonly felt among those from less affluent socio-economic groups. Checking

use-by dates on goods delivered online was also very prevalent. Checking use-by dates was regarded as slightly more complicated with online shopping, as consumers dealt with the pressures of unloading crates in the kitchen whilst the delivery person waited. However, consumers appeared willing to return goods with few issues emerging as a result.

In regard to travel, most consumers had made some preparations and arrangements in response to changes resulting from EU Exit. Such actions included checking the dates on their passports or applying for / receiving an Irish passport. Despite this, as also experienced in previous years, significant proportions felt that EU Exit was having a negative impact on the queues at passport control, exchange rates – value for money and custom checks when they travel.

Receiving unexpected roaming charges when travelling to the EU was also a concern. Of those who had travelled to the EU in the previous twelve-month period, almost a fifth (18%) had been subject to such a charge.

Compared to 2021, fewer consumers claimed they would be 'less likely' to shop cross border as a result of EU Exit, with the vast majority suggesting there was no change in their cross-border activity. The purchase of petrol/diesel and food and drink continued to be the main attractions for cross border shopping. This research was conducted before the majority of Windsor Framework implementation took place. The Consumer Council will continue to monitor the impacts of EU Exit on Northern Ireland consumers. We will use our consumer insights and research to represent consumer experiences to policy makers in the UK and EU.

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