

# Northern Ireland consumers and EU Exit:

An overview of EU Exit  
experiences in 2023

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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 31st December 2020. The Northern Ireland Protocol (NI Protocol) was implemented on the 1st 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 Over three years the Consumer Council has undertaken a programme of research to monitor the impact of EU Exit on NI consumers. The research is based on two elements:

- An online representative survey with 1,011 participants who were asked about their experiences and opinions across a range of topics such as consumer rights, food availability and affordability, post, travel, energy and shopping. The participants of this study were recruited to be demographically representative of the NI adult population.
- Online focus groups were also carried out to give participants a chance to further articulate their experiences of EU Exit. Six focus groups were conducted with consumers from each of NI's Local Government Districts (LGDs) represented. Each focus group consisted of 8 participants.

1.3 The key findings show:

- The top concerns for consumers continue to be the NI economy, price increases and maintaining a frictionless border with the Republic of Ireland (ROI) consistent with previous findings from 2022 and 2021.
- The cost of living and consumers financial resilience was a recurring theme throughout this research. Consumers report a lessened ability to absorb price increases, with only 17% of respondents stating they could do so (22% in 2022, 27% in 2021).
- Consumers were asked what impact EU Exit has had on a range of common expenditures. Consumers attributed EU Exit to rising food costs (76%), energy costs (69%) and the price of eating out (64%).
- Food prices and financial wellbeing remain intrinsically linked with 80% of respondents reporting that rising food prices are negatively impacting their finances (75% in 2022).

- Over the three years of this research consumer concerns and experiences of food shopping that they attribute to EU Exit have continued to worsen

## 1. Higher prices (89% in 2023, up from 83% in 2022)

## 2. Shortages of certain goods (81% in 2023, compared to 71% in 2022)

## 3. Shorter shelf life (52% in 2023<sup>1</sup>)

- More consumers reported in 2023 having to do without certain food products (67% in 2023, compared to 63% in 2022) and having to substitute alternatives or search for fresh goods locally where the shelf life of products is longer (72% in 2023, up from 61% in 2022).
- Nearly half (48%) of consumers surveyed reported feeling that their rights will be less well protected having left the EU (41% in 2022 and 32% in 2021). This is reflected in the finding that consumers report an increasing worry having left the EU (63% in 2023 compared to 55% in 2022 or 52% in 2021).
- In terms of the guidance that consumers would find helpful, information on consumer rights / protections was most common (90%) followed by guidance on actions that consumers need to take (88%) and information on goods and services (86%).
- Building work emerged as a consumer issue in the 2022 EU Exit research and we delved into this in more detail in 2023. Consumers reported issues with both the cost (54%) and supply (50%) of labour, and the cost (53%) and supply (49%) of building materials.
- With more consumers starting to travel again after the pandemic, the cost of travel, queues at passport control and customs checks are of major concern to consumers. 83% of consumers reported requiring more information regarding travel following EU Exit.
- 37% of consumers believe that mobile phone charges have been negatively impacted by EU Exit compared to 49% in 2022 and 41% in 2021. Some consumers report that their provider continues to offer EU roaming within existing data allowances, whilst others report having been charged daily roaming fees when travelling within the EU.
- Great Britain (GB) online marketplaces remain hugely important to NI consumers with approximately nine out of ten (94%) consumers shopping online, with our research showing that three-quarters (75%) of online shopping is being purchased from GB retailers.

<sup>1</sup> This was a new question and the first year this was asked.

- Consumers are increasingly concerned in 2023 about the supply and availability of products purchased online with 66% expressing concern (63% in 2022 and 55% in 2021). The cost of online shopping is also of concern with more than half (56%) of respondents reporting an increase to online costs (52% in 2022 and 46% in 2021).
- GB retailers not delivering to NI was the top ranked experience noted by consumers when shopping online, with 40% of respondents asserting that they experienced this. However, this is a significant drop with 77% of consumers previously reporting this issue in 2022. This may be due to an increase in GB retailers which have resumed delivery to NI.
- The rate of cross border shopping has remained consistent across the last three years, with food and drink (59%) being the most common item consumers cross the border to purchase, followed by petrol and diesel (53%) and clothing (46%). Those crossing the border to shop were less likely to do so to purchase petrol or diesel (down from 75% in 2022 to 53% in the current survey).
- As in previous survey waves, there continues to be a close association between voting intention and survey response. 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.



## 2. The Consumer Council

- 2.1 The Consumer Council is the consumer representative body for Northern Ireland (NI) responsible for championing consumer interests. The Consumer Council is passionate about ensuring that others do the same so that markets, legislation and regulation work effectively for consumers across NI.
- 2.2 The Consumer Council is 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 The Consumer Council has specific statutory functions in energy, postal services, transport, water and sewerage, and food affordability and accessibility. A key function of the Consumer Council is to educate and empower consumers against unfair or discriminatory practices in any market including financial services and private car parks. Across both its statutory and non-statutory areas, particular regard is given 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 The Consumer Council has responsibilities under the Rural Needs Act 2016 and Section 75 of the NI Act 1998. In this role, the 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.

## 3. The NI consumer position

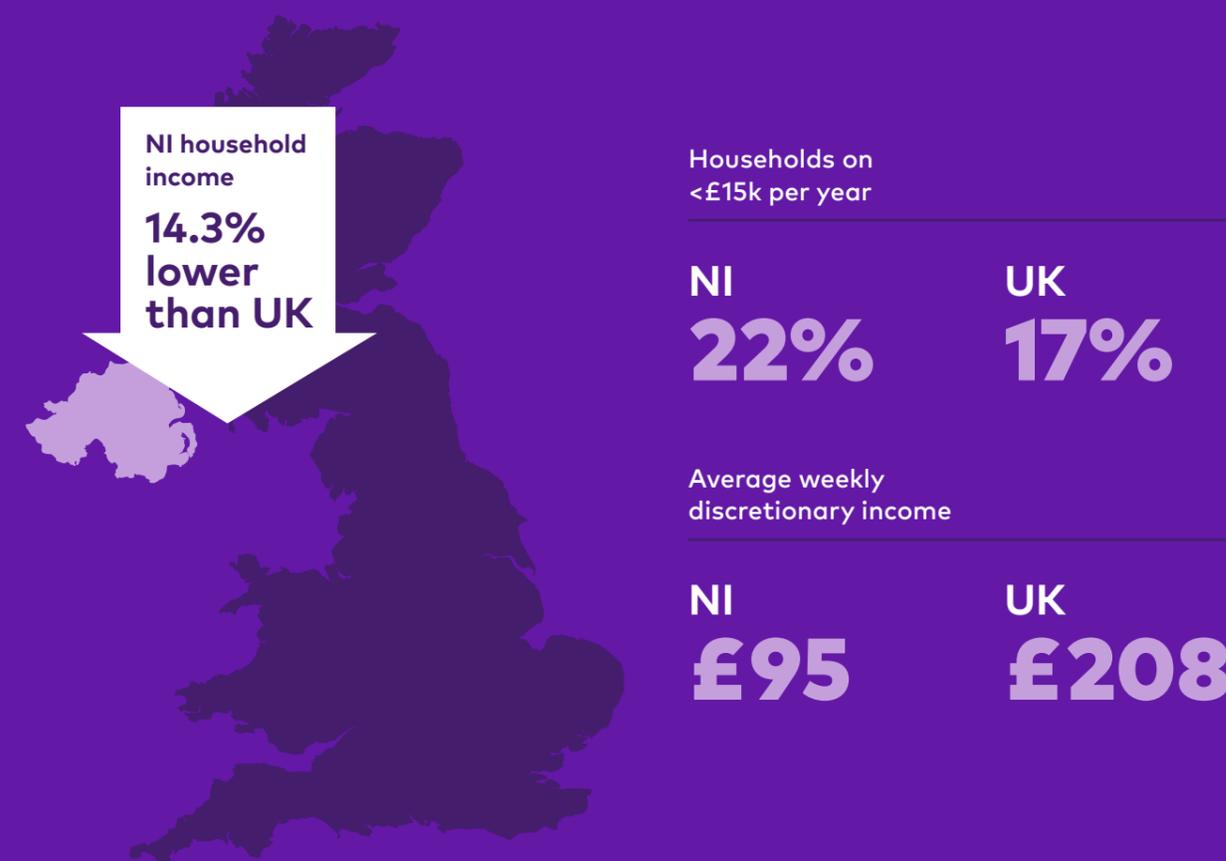
- 3.1 Northern Ireland (NI) holds a unique position within the United Kingdom (UK) and various geographic and economic factors mean that citizens face different challenges than other constituent countries of the UK.

### Population and the labour supply

- 3.2 NI only represents 3% of the total UK population (c1.9 million vs c67 million)<sup>2</sup>, with more than double the proportion of citizens living in rural areas (36%) compared to England (17.1%) and Scotland (17%)<sup>3</sup>.
- 3.3 When looking across the labour market, despite having a lower unemployment rate, NI has the highest rate of economic inactivity across the UK (26.6% vs 20.9%)<sup>4</sup>.
- 3.4 NI has a higher rate of consumer vulnerability compared to the UK (50% vs 47%)<sup>5</sup> and has almost double the number of Disability & Carer's Benefits claimants compared to the UK (c20% vs c11%)<sup>6</sup>.
- 3.5 Citizens in NI have different needs compared to the rest of the UK and therefore rely differently on certain goods and services. For example, the majority (68%) of households in NI use home heating oil (rising to 82% in rural areas)<sup>7</sup>, compared to c6% in the UK<sup>8</sup>.
- 3.6 How citizens buy goods and services also differ with those in NI being twice as reliant on cash to pay for 'everything' or 'most things' vs the UK (13% vs 6%)<sup>9</sup>. This means that access to banking services and ATMs are more important in NI than across the UK and so changes to these will have a greater impact.

### Income and expenditure

- 3.7 Households in NI have lower levels of income compared to the UK. Average household income in NI is 14.3% lower than the UK (£54k vs £63k) and NI also has more households on <£15k per year (22% vs 17%)<sup>10</sup>. When looking at spending power, the average weekly discretionary household income is 54.3% lower than the UK average (£95 vs £208)<sup>11</sup>.
- 3.8 11% of NI adults have 'no savings or investments' compared to 10% of UK adults<sup>12</sup>.



<sup>2</sup> National Online Manpower Information System (NOMIS), Total Population, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> NI: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), NI: In Profile, November 2022. England: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), Rural population and migration, October 2021. Scotland: Scottish Government, Rural Scotland Key Facts 2021, February 2021.

<sup>4</sup> National Online Manpower Information System (NOMIS), Labour Supply, Apr-Jun 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), Financial Lives May 2022 survey: selected results by nation of the UK, July 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Disability & Carer's Benefits consist of: Personal Independence Payment, Disability Living Allowance, Carer's Allowance and Attendance Allowance. These percentages are based on the ONS UK population mid-year estimate of 67,026,300 (released: 21 December 2022) and the ONS NI population mid-year estimate of 1,904,600 (released: 21 December 2022), NI: NISRA and Department for Communities, Northern Ireland Benefits Statistics Summary, February 2023, UK: Department for Work and Pensions, DWP benefits statistics, August 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Centre for Progressive Policy, The cost of living crisis across the devolved nations, July 2023.

<sup>8</sup> UK: Calculated based on the estimated number of UK households using home heating oil (UK Government, December 2022) as a percentage of the total estimated number of UK households (ONS, Families and households in the UK, May 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), Financial Lives May 2022 survey: selected results by nation of the UK, July 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), Financial Lives May 2022 survey: selected results by nation of the UK, July 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Asda, Asda Income Tracker for Q2 2023, June 2023.

## NI's lowest earning households

- 3.9 To investigate the impact of the cost of living crisis on households in NI, the Consumer Council publishes a Household Expenditure Tracker on a quarterly basis. The Tracker examines income and expenditure for households in NI across four income groups (quartiles).
- 3.10 In the most recent publication<sup>13</sup> for Q1 2023 covering January to March, the Tracker found that Northern Ireland's lowest earning households<sup>14</sup> in Quartile 1 were the worst affected income group over the last year with their discretionary income falling 29.5% from £28.12 to £19.83 per week.
- 3.11 This comes despite these households seeing their discretionary income rise 2.4% over the last quarter to March 2023. These improvements to discretionary income were driven by the slight easing of inflation relative to the end of 2022 and continued growth in earnings. It is important to note that this increase was marginal and follows seven quarters where it fell consecutively.
- 3.12 Households in NI are more vulnerable than their UK counterparts. Gross household income for the lowest earning households in NI is 12% lower than the equivalent households in the UK (£244.83 vs £279.22) and 74% of these households' income is derived from social securities (benefits) compared to the UK (60%).
- 3.13 If existing economic trends continue discretionary income will remain low in 2023 across NI. This will impact lower earning households most severely as they spend higher proportions of their income on food, energy and transport than higher earning counterparts. For example, NI's lowest earning households spend 49% of net household income on food, rent, energy, and transport<sup>15</sup>, markets that have had high prices the last year.

<sup>12</sup> Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), Financial Lives May 2022 survey: selected results by nation of the UK, July 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Consumer Council, Northern Ireland Household Expenditure Tracker for Q1 2023 (January to March), July 2023.

<sup>14</sup> 'Lowest earning households' definition: Income quartiles are a measure that divide the population into four income groups (from lowest income to highest income). The 'lowest earning households', also known as Quartile 1, are the bottom 25 per cent of the income distribution.

<sup>15</sup> Consumer Council, Northern Ireland Household Expenditure Tracker for Q1 2023 (January to March), July 2023.

## 4. Introduction and methodology

- 4.1 In 2020, the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) concluded the Withdrawal Agreement which saw the UK leave the EU single market and the Customs Union. As part of the Withdrawal Agreement, the Northern Ireland Protocol (NI Protocol) was established to address concerns about the integrity of the UK single market for goods and the avoidance of a hard border between Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (ROI).
- 4.2 Since leaving the EU, the Consumer Council has conducted yearly research on the impact to NI consumers. This current research was conducted before the introduction of the Windsor Framework, announced in February 2023. Against a background of uncertainty on how the issues with the NI Protocol will be resolved, NI consumers continue to have concerns about how their rights and standards will be impacted.
- 4.3 Within our previous research conducted in 2022, NI consumers reported that their top concerns were the economy, price increases and maintaining a frictionless border with ROI. Consumers also reported difficulties across a range of issues, some of these issues included:
- Consumer rights being less well protected;
  - Price increases impacting personal finances;
  - Affordability and variety of food shopping;
  - Energy supply and affordability;
  - Travel issues and added regulations.
- 4.4 This report covers the most recent period of research carried out between November and December 2022. It draws comparisons with the findings from 2021 and early 2022 on the impacts of EU Exit on NI consumers, allowing for changes to be seen across a three-year period. We also discuss consumer experiences of the cost and supply of building materials, as this emerged as an ongoing issue from previous research.

- 4.5 Energy supply and affordability issues were removed from this year's research. Previous qualitative research had discussed energy supply and affordability and how it negatively impacted consumers' finances and cost of living. While energy costs were of huge concern to consumers, they did understand that energy supply issues were not attributable to EU Exit, therefore these questions were removed from further research.
- 4.6 All surveys consisted of a demographically representative sample of NI's population.

### Quantitative Research

- 4.7 The Consumer Council has commissioned yearly quantitative surveys which examine consumer views and experiences of EU Exit. These projects use demographically representative online panels and a similar methodology so consistency could be shown over time, with relevant questions being updated to reflect the current landscape in NI. The 2021 report consisted of 1,000 consumers and aimed to gauge the early perceptions and experiences of consumers in relation to EU Exit. The 2022 report consisted of 1,009 consumers.
- 4.8 In November 2022 the Consumer Council commissioned the current research project, with the analysis and reporting of this data being completed in 2023. This survey consisted of 1,011 respondents.
- 4.9 This report also uses statistics from a separate study conducted by the Consumer Council's postal services department<sup>16</sup>. This research looked at consumer experiences in shopping online, sending parcels and receiving parcels. The study consisted of three large-scale quantitative consumer surveys conducted in August 2022 (n=1022), November 2022 (n=1004) and February/March 2023 (n=1022).

### Qualitative research

- 4.10 For each project the Consumer Council commissioned a number of focus groups to allow consumers to discuss in depth their experiences of EU Exit. These qualitative research projects ran alongside our yearly surveys. Focus groups were conducted across all 11 Local Government Districts (LGDs) allowing us to gather a wide range of experiences and detail consumer experiences relating to the NI/ROI border.

- 4.11 Qualitative focus groups were conducted in 2021 consisting of 11 focus groups (10 participants in each group). The following year our 2022 research consisted of 11 focus groups (8 participants each). This qualitative research helped us to better understand consumers' experience of EU Exit and was used to refine questions in consecutive years to allow consumers to best express the experiences most relevant to them.
- 4.12 The present research consisted of 6 focus groups (8 participants in each) and was conducted in December 2022. This report combines survey data across 2021, 2022 and 2023, detailing consumer experiences within a number of areas such as food, energy, travel, digital, postal services and online shopping.

Please note that some of 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.

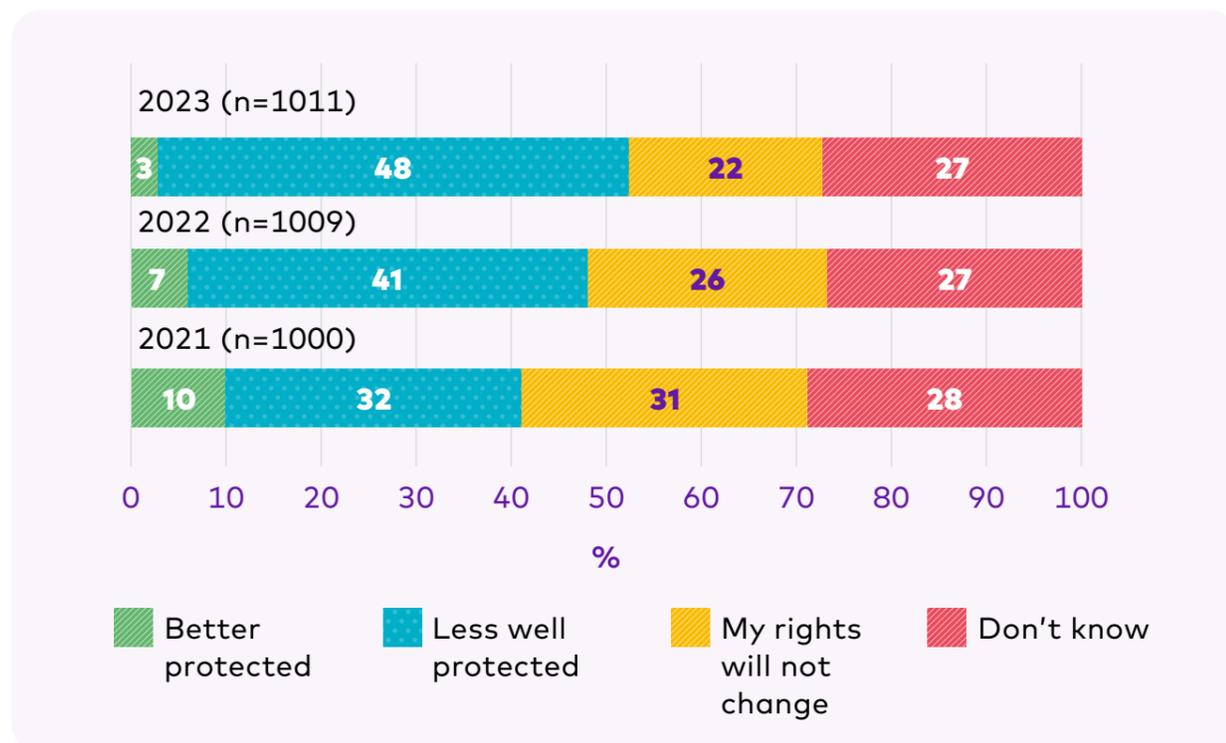


<sup>16</sup> The Consumer Council, Impact of EU Exit on Postal Consumers, May 2023.

# 5. Consumer rights and concerns

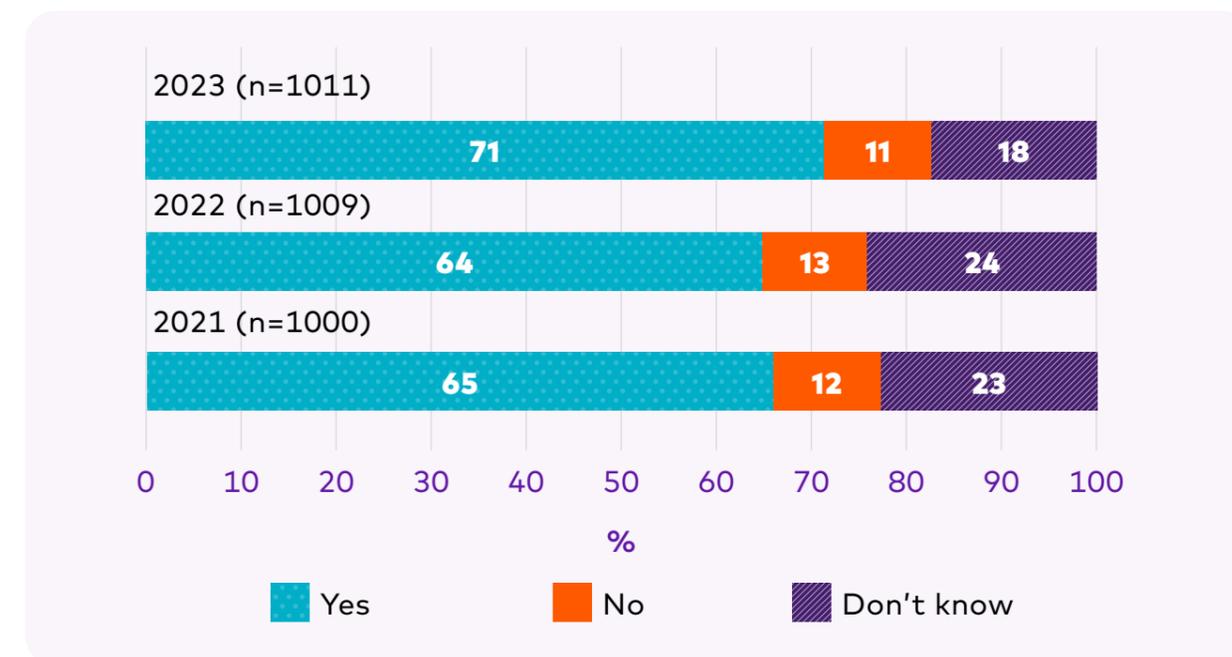
- 5.1 The Northern Ireland (NI) political and economic landscape has seen many changes in recent years, with EU Exit, the NI Protocol and the recent introduction of the Windsor Framework. At the time this research was conducted it was still to be determined how these processes would be operationalised and how this would impact consumers. Therefore, it is important that the Consumer Council continues to monitor how consumers feel about their rights, protections and to understand the areas in which consumers require information and guidance.
- 5.2 The significant trend across the three surveys is that fewer consumers believe that their rights will be better protected since EU Exit (Figure 1). Almost half (48%) now believe that their rights will be less well protected compared with 41% in 2022 and 32% in 2021.

Figure 1: Having left the EU how do you feel your consumer rights will be impacted?



- 5.3 Combined with the finding that consumers are feeling less well protected, the current survey shows that most consumers say they would find it helpful for a consumer body to provide NI specific guidance on EU Exit, with the increase between 2022 and 2023 statistically significant in Figure 2 (71% in 2023 versus 64% in 2022).

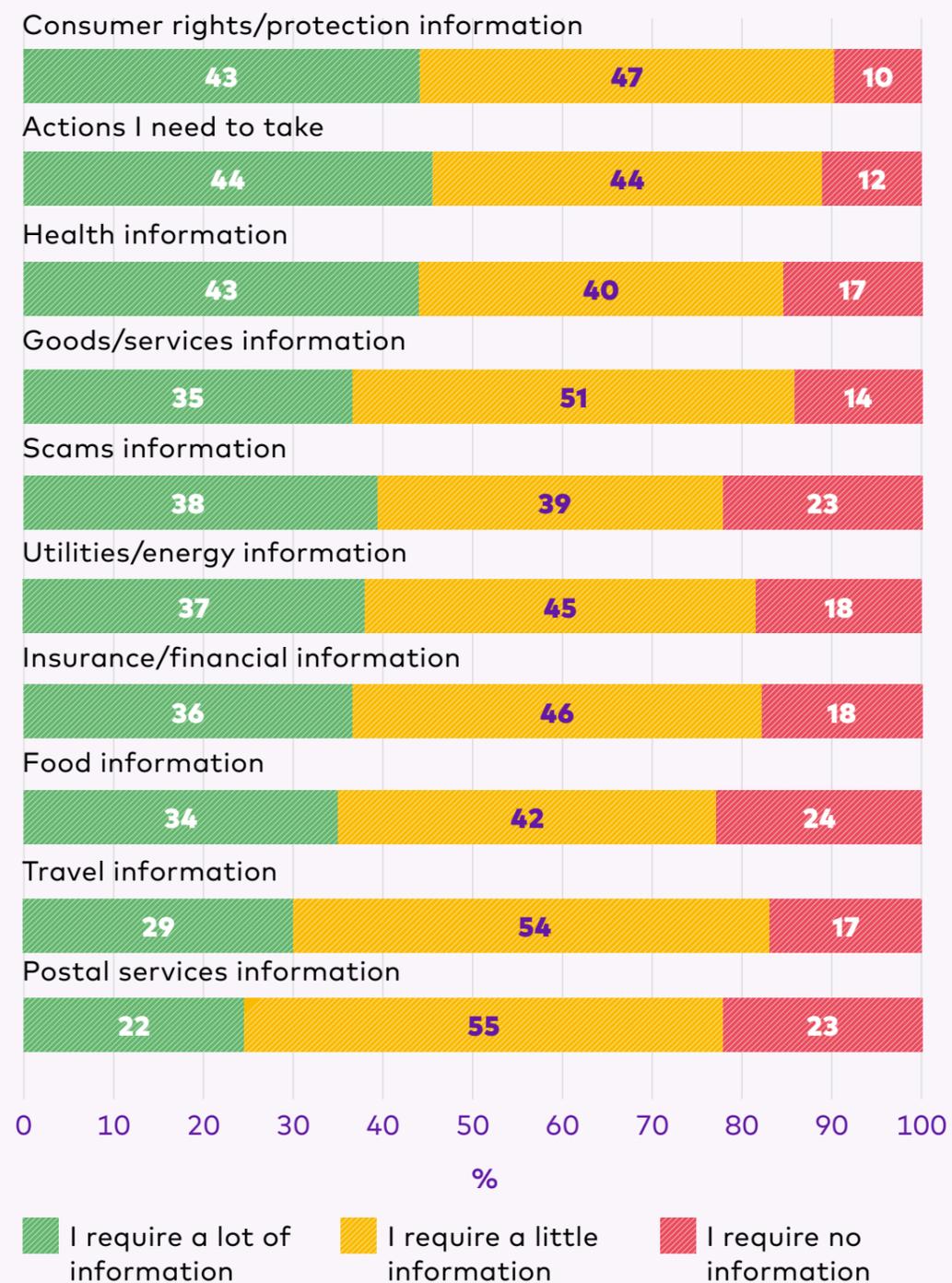
Figure 2: Would you find it helpful for a consumer body to provide NI specific guidance for consumers on EU Exit?



- 5.4 In terms of the guidance that consumers would find helpful, information on consumer rights / protections was the most common (90%) followed by guidance on actions that consumers need to take (88%), and information on goods and services (86%). Although not directly comparable with previous surveys, the broad pattern of response to this question in this current survey, is consistent with previous surveys<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> In the current survey, the response categories were: require a lot of information, require a little information and require no information. In previous surveys respondents were simply asked if they required information on each area (yes or no).

Figure 3: What information do you require most in relation to EU Exit and its potential impact in NI? (n=713)



5.5 Our qualitative research found that people continue to be confused about the changes brought about by EU Exit and are concerned that they might be put at risk. Many couldn't articulate what the risks are beyond a general sense of wariness. Others were unsure if price rises and shortages are an impact of EU Exit or other factors.

**"It is hard for ordinary people to sort it all out and hard for us to understand all the technicalities. We feel vulnerable when we buy things from the European Union or from Great Britain but can't really put a finger on why. It's like a conga line of misfortune that started in 2016 and is still going on."**

**"I just have an overall feeling of uncertainty and stress due to the increase in everyday bills and not knowing if Brexit or the war or COVID or political chopping and changing and rising inflation is the cause. I think it is probably all these things."**

5.6 Consumers still require more information about EU Exit. They primarily look to the government for this information, but there is a level of distrust about government information and how it is presented. Independent advice, sent out to everyone, is favoured by consumers.

"It is really up to the government to tell people about the customs rules, [...] we need straightforward and simple explanations."

"We need a letter to everyone explaining what it all means. I don't understand and I struggle with the whole concept."

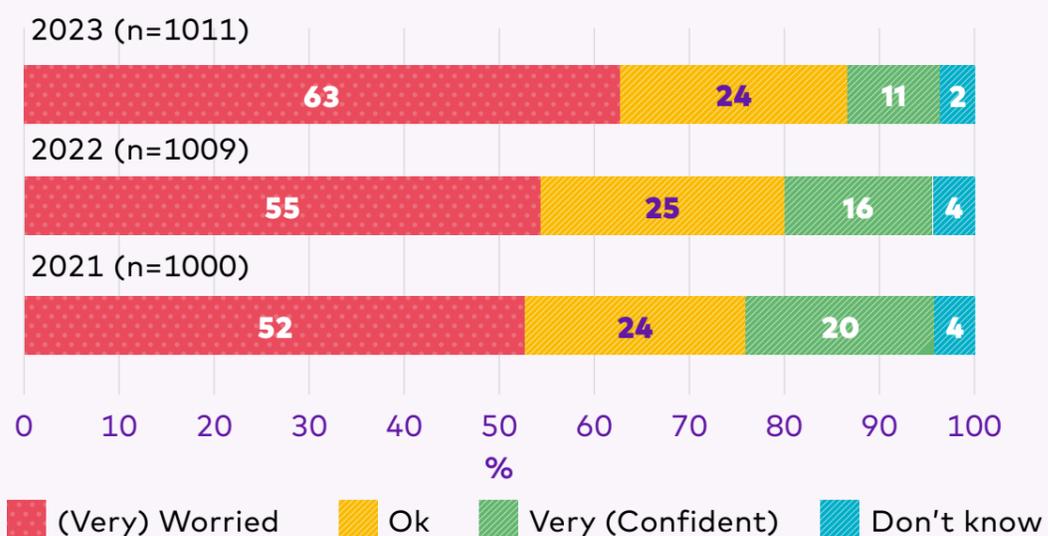
"It is the responsibility of government to inform, there is a lack of transparency at the moment, we don't know if we are getting the full picture, we need all the facts. But trust may not be there in government, so someone like Advice NI, or charities or the Consumer Council, could give more trusted advice and guidance."



### Consumer Concerns

5.7 A majority of consumers continue to be concerned now that we have left the European Union (EU), with the level of concern recorded in the current survey (63%) significantly higher than previously recorded in 2022 (55%) and 2021 (52%). Similarly, the proportion of consumers who say they feel confident now that we have left the EU, continues to fall (compared with previous years).

Figure 4: As an NI consumer, how do you feel now that we have left the EU?



5.8 The research also asked consumers to rank their concerns relating to EU Exit with the top concerns being the economy of NI, price increases and maintaining a frictionless border with the Republic of Ireland (ROI). Over the three survey years, consumer ranked concerns have largely remained consistent.

Table 1: Ranked EU Exit concerns by year

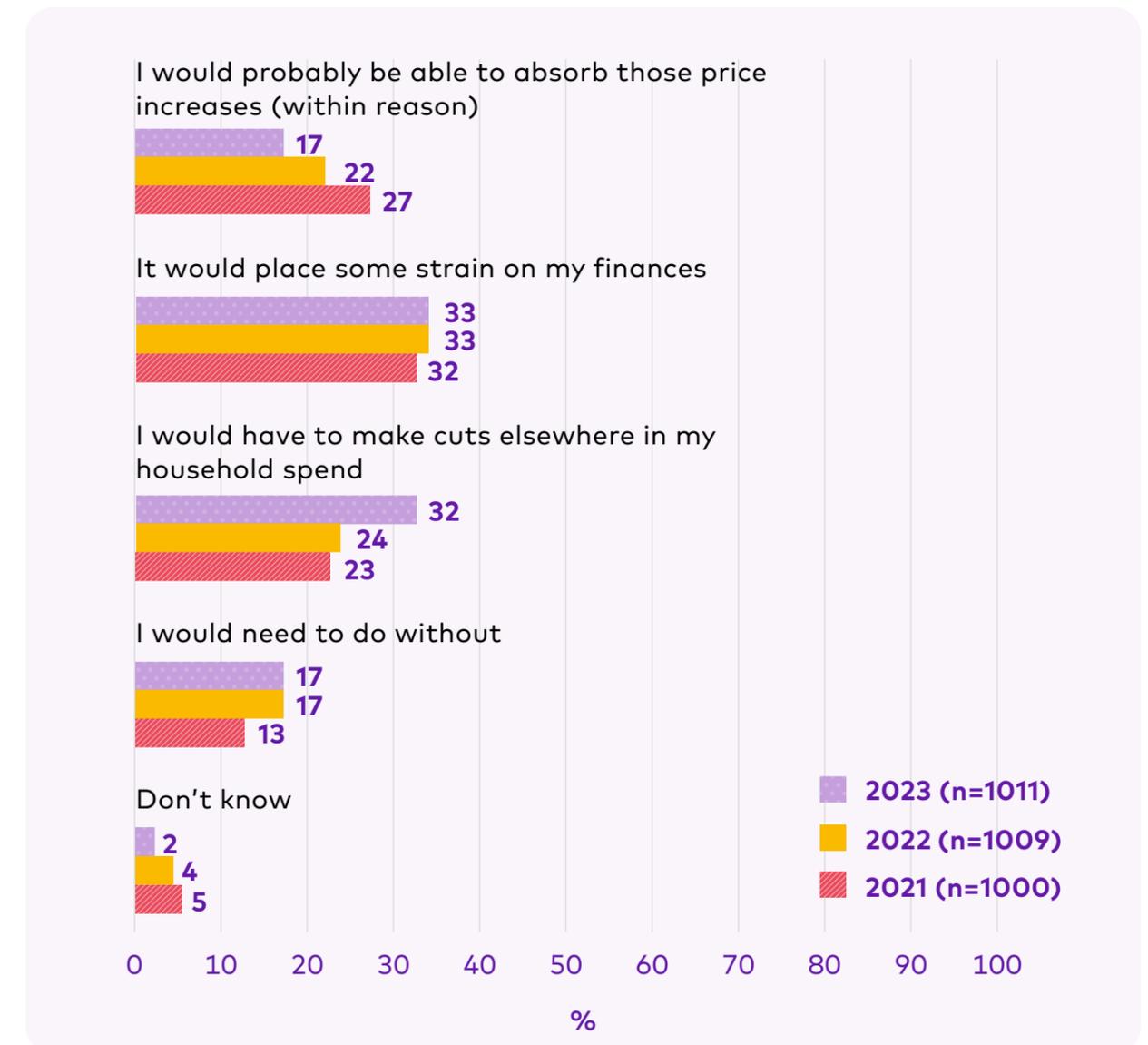
	2023	2022	2021
1	Economy of NI	Economy of NI	Price increases
2	Price increases	Price increases	Economy of NI
3	Maintaining a frictionless border with ROI	Maintaining a frictionless border with ROI	Maintaining a frictionless border with ROI
4	Maintaining choice of retailers/products available in NI	Introduction of customs checks	Reduction of choice of retailers/products available in NI
5	Introduction of tariffs on goods sourced from outside NI	Maintaining choice of retailers/products available in NI	Introduction of tariffs on goods sourced from outside NI
6	Introduction of customs checks	Maintaining quality of food standards	Introduction of customs checks
7	Maintaining quality of food standards	Introduction of tariffs on goods sourced from outside NI	Longer delivery times
8	Longer delivery times	Maintaining product safety and standards	Reduction in quality of food standards
9	Maintaining product safety and standards	Longer delivery times	Reduction in product safety and standards
10	Maintaining consumer protections	Maintaining consumer protections	Reduction of consumer protections

# 6. General price increases

- 6.1 Given the current economic climate and the cost of living, price rises are a real concern for NI consumers. Our research shows that a significant number of consumers believe that their finances would be adversely impacted if prices were to rise further due to EU Exit.
- 6.2 In 2023 only 17% of consumers say they will be able to absorb price increases related to EU Exit, compared to 22% in 2022 and 27% in 2021. Figure 5 also shows a significant increase in the number of consumers indicating that they would need to make cuts elsewhere in their household spend should prices rise further with 32% reporting this (up from 24% in 2022 and 23% in 2021).

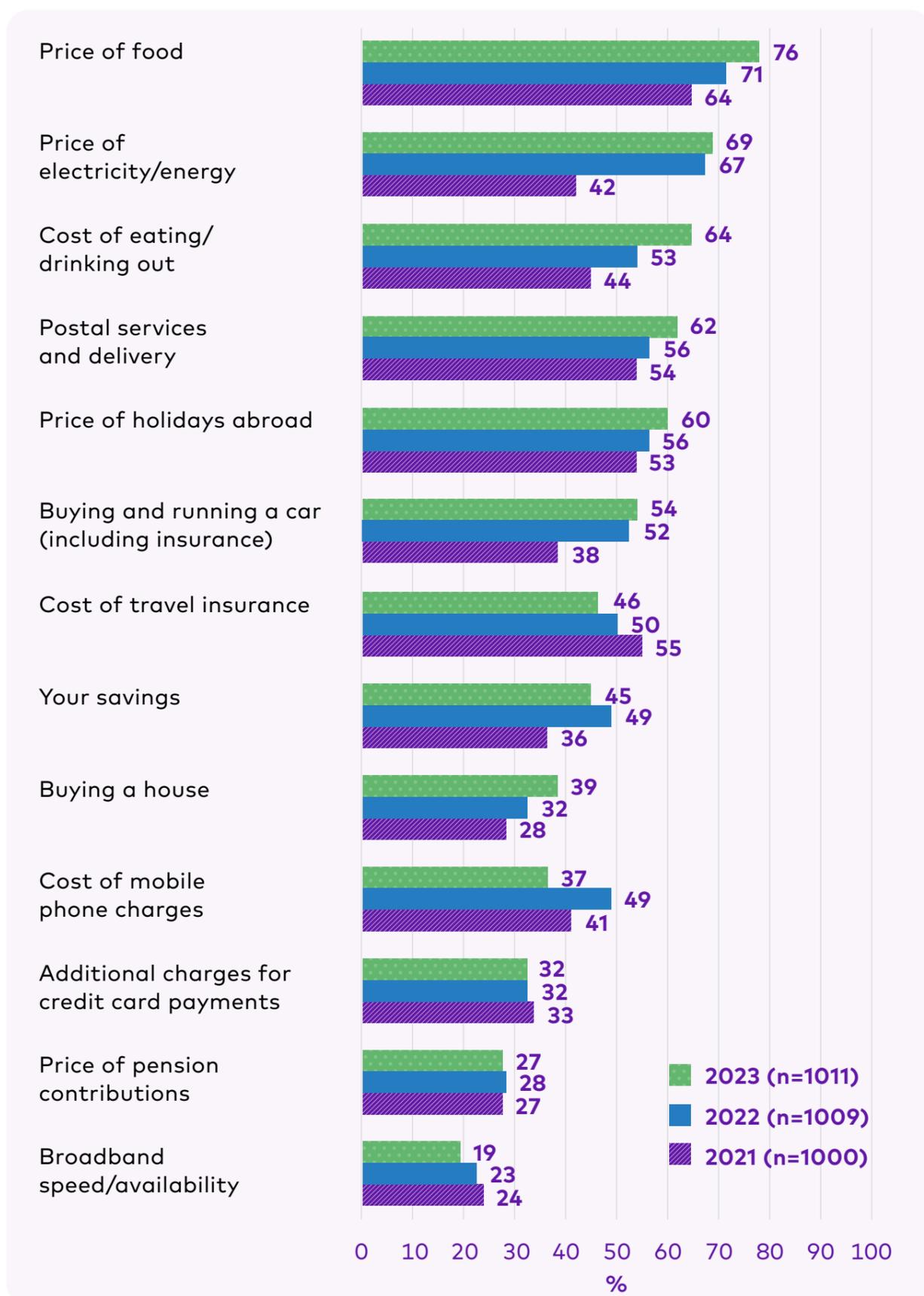


Figure 5: If prices in general were to rise following our exit from the EU, what impact would this have on your finances?



- 6.3 Consumers were asked about the impact of EU Exit on things that they commonly spend on. In the current survey most consumers reported that EU Exit has had a negative impact on the price of food, the price of electricity/energy, the cost of eating and drinking out, postal services and delivery, prices of holidays abroad, and buying and running a car.

Figure 6: Consumers reporting negative impacts across a range of common expenditures



6.4 As with the previous surveys, the current survey shows that the price of food is seen as the common expenditure most affected by EU Exit. The current survey also shows that a greater proportion of consumers believe that EU Exit has negatively impacted the price of energy and electricity, as well as the cost of eating and drinking out.

6.5 Our qualitative research shows that some people blame EU Exit for price increases, whilst others point to other factors or are unsure.

"I voted to remain. I think leaving the EU is starting to show now, we are all being affected; fuel has gone up, groceries have gone up, just the cost of living as a whole."

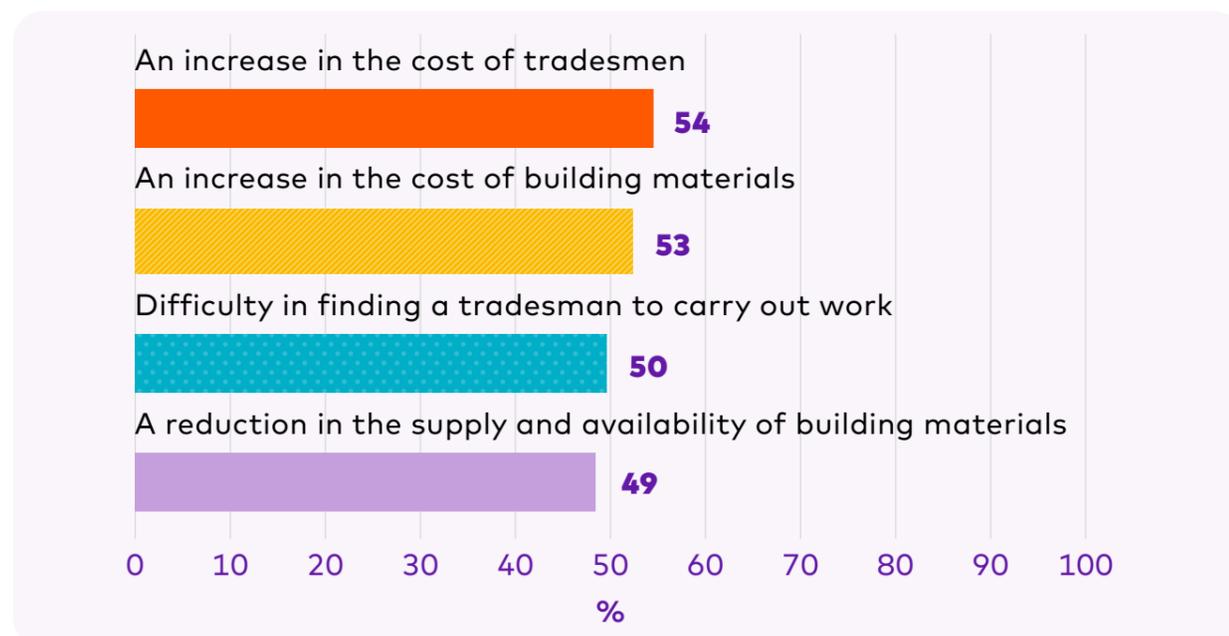
"There are problems with prices, and the limited availability of certain products, but it is hard to know if this is due to Brexit, the war in Ukraine or COVID-19."

"I voted leave. I didn't see any difference in the cost of groceries or fuel when Brexit came in; it only escalated when the war started. From a business perspective, I have seen difficulties getting supplies, but not in my personal life."

**Price and availability of building products and labour**

6.6 The 2023 survey shows that significant numbers of consumers have experienced issues relating to building work including an increase in the cost of labour (54%), an increase in the cost of building materials (53%), difficulty in finding building workers (50%) and a reduction in the supply and availability of building materials (49%).

Figure 7: Please indicate if you have experienced any of the following which you believe have been caused by leaving the EU (rather than COVID-19)? (n=1011)



6.7 Our qualitative work provides some more detail on difficulties that people have experienced with building work since EU Exit.

**"I did the interior of my house up just after we left the EU properly in 2020. After Brexit, the price literally doubled. I wanted to do work on the outside of the house too, but no-one would give me a quote and it is still like that, nobody wants to commit to a price because costs are not stable."**

**"I am renovating my house since Brexit, and it has been harder to source construction products for our renovations. For example, I couldn't get the kitchen I wanted as they would not deliver to NI, so I had to compromise. Flooring was also an issue it was extremely difficult to source the laminate flooring we wanted."**

6.8 Our previous research reported that the increase in the price of building products was causing changes in consumer behaviour, with more consumers travelling across the border to purchase building supplies. This trend has continued in 2023 with 26% of consumers reporting that they are more likely to cross the border to purchase building materials (19% in 2022 and 9% in 2021).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See figure 17.

## 7. Food shopping experience since EU Exit

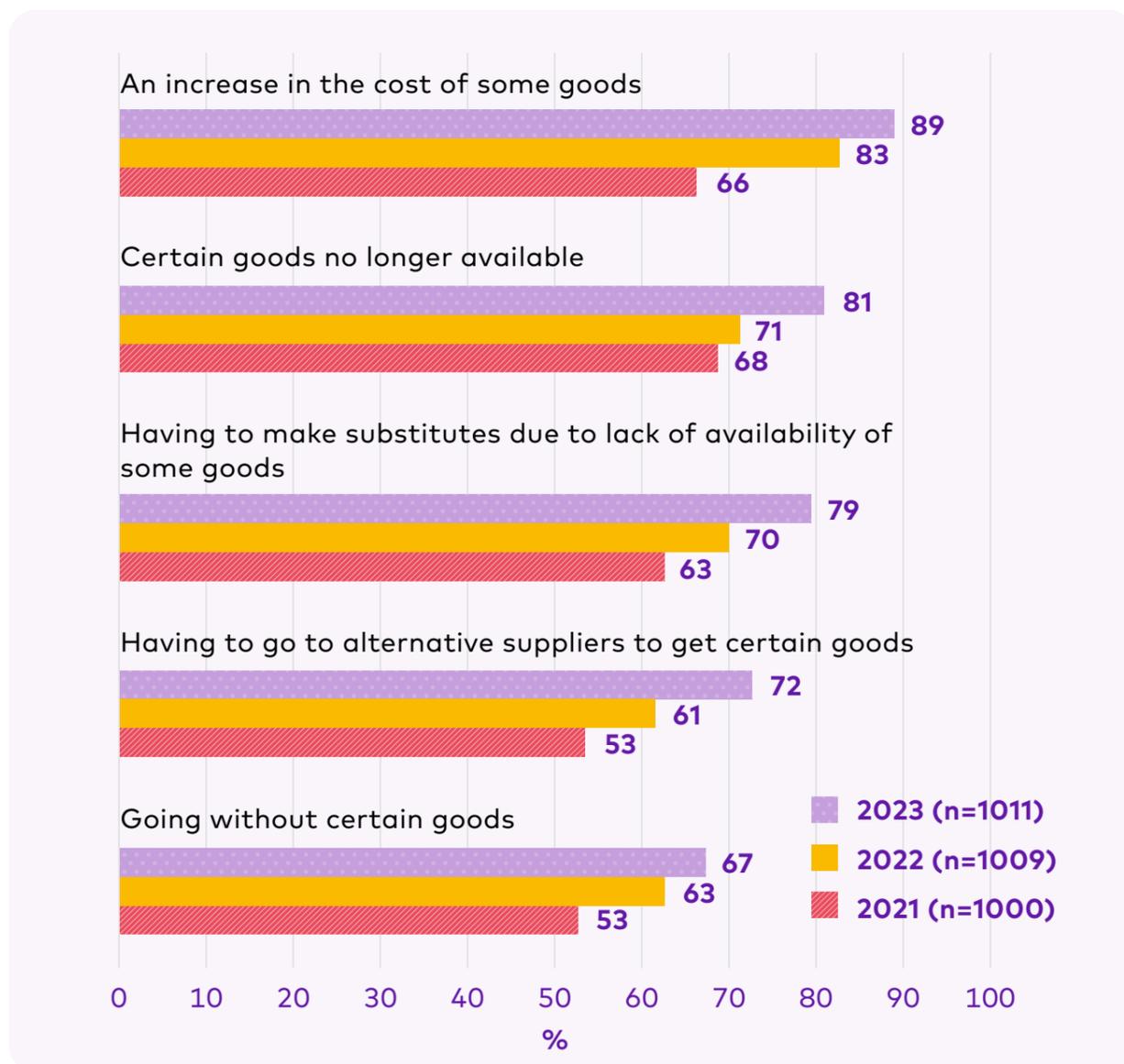
7.1 In line with the previous surveys in 2021 and 2022, most consumers in NI believe that EU Exit has had a negative impact of both the availability and cost of food.

7.2 Figure 8 shows that consumers' experience of their supermarket shop continues to deteriorate, with significant increases in negative experiences seen each year including:

- Increases in the cost of some goods (89% in 2023, up from 83% in 2022)
- Goods no longer available (81% in 2023, up from 71% in 2022)
- Making substitutes due to lack of availability (79% in 2023, 70% in 2022)
- Using alternative suppliers (72% in 2023, up from 61% in 2022)
- Going without certain goods (67% in 2023, up from 63% in 2022)

7.3 Furthermore, a new question in the current survey found that just over half (52%) of consumers reported a shorter shelf life for fresh food.

Figure 8: Consumers' experience of their supermarket shop



7.4 Our qualitative research also shows that people continue to experience shortages of certain goods, price rises and less choice on the shelves. Longer delivery times for some goods and shorter shelf life for fresh food also continue to be reported

**"There are six of us in this household, I have four children and the biggest thing we have noticed since Brexit proper is the increase in the family grocery bill which has gone from about £100 to £150, and you are struggling to keep it under £150 and that is with watching what you buy all the time. Others might disagree, but for me this is mostly down to Brexit."**

**"There is not the variety of food that there was before. It has stabilised a bit, but there are still a lot of things you can't get. Food for example: cheeses have got a lot more expensive and there is a lot of branded goods that you don't get anymore so I am buying supermarket own brands or going without."**

**"The slower distribution of goods and empty shelves are definitely down to Brexit... and the shelf life of products is definitely shorter and that must be because there are delays at the ports."**

**"When I think of my shopping habits, when I go to the big shops like (supermarket) a lot of the shelves are empty a lot of the time. Where I live, we don't have the same choice of groceries that we use to have. If you go to your local store and then decide to go to (supermarket) to buy something special, the groceries are just the same. There is just not the variety that used to be there."**

## Price increases

7.5 In 2023, 80% of consumers reported that rising food prices are negatively impacting their financial wellbeing compared to 75% in 2022. This 80% comprises of consumers who state rising prices shall:

- Place some strain on my finances (33%);
- I will have to make cuts elsewhere in my household spend (33%);
- I will need to do without some items entirely (14%).

7.6 Our qualitative research also reflects these findings. Consumers report that they can no longer afford treats like eating out or buying clothing because food prices have put such a strain on household finances.

**Green bubble:** "It's about living within your means. Do I go out for a meal on a Saturday night, or do we get a takeout? It's about making sure we have enough to pay for the essentials. Do I need that new coat or do I put £20 on the electric card?"

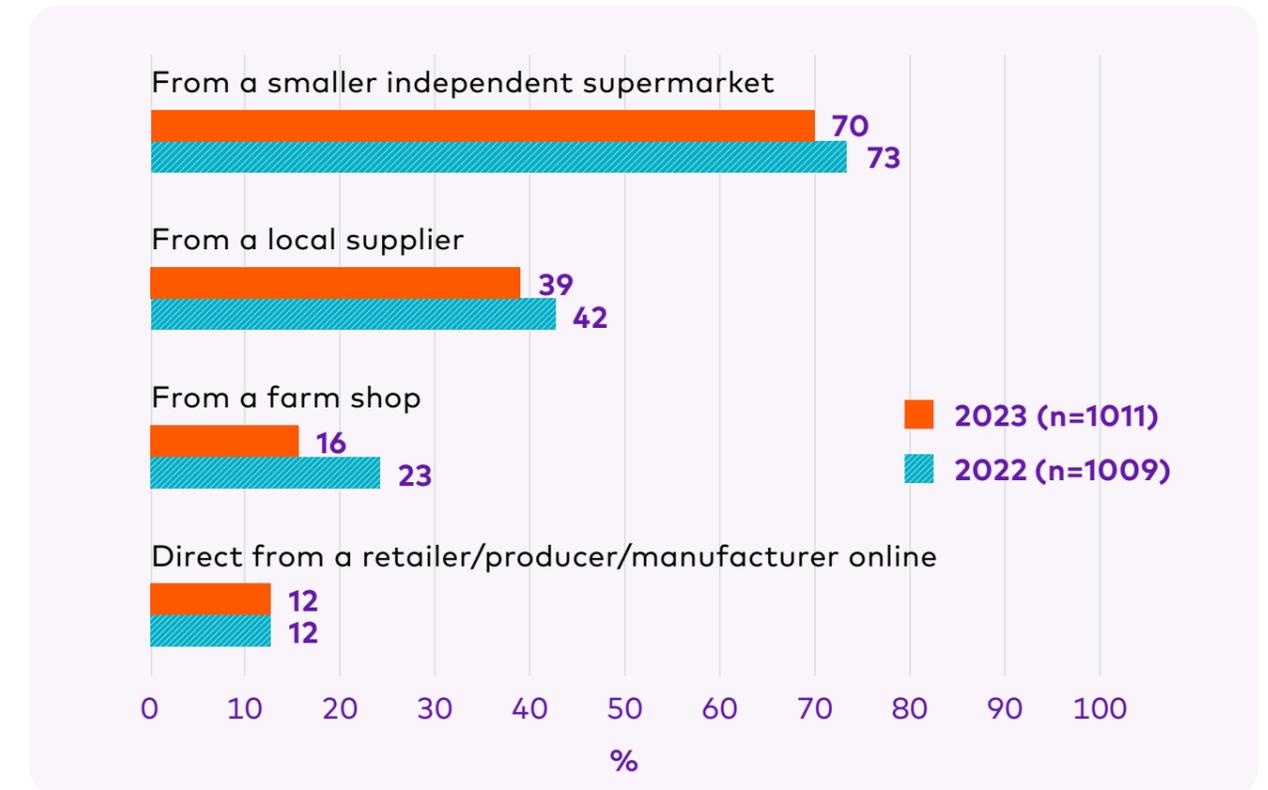
**Yellow bubble:** "I am not buying as much in the way of clothes or toiletries as I used to do. I buy the cheapest stuff I can find now rather than what I would like to buy."

**Red bubble:** "We have made a whole lot of changes with regard to shopping habits like not buying takeaways anymore. They are very much a treat now. We don't really go out much for dinner or go out in general. We might go to the park, but we try to steer clear of things that cost a lot of money."

## Changes to consumer behaviour

7.7 The consumer behaviour changes reported by consumers in 2022 have been sustained in this current survey, with approximately seven out of ten (70%) consumers saying they purchase food from smaller independent supermarkets and around four out of ten (39%) do so from local suppliers.

Figure 9: Changes in consumer behaviour regarding shopping for food



7.8 Our qualitative research identified examples of people shopping in budget orientated supermarkets and local shops. Some said that fresh goods were of better quality if they shop locally. Others said that some foods in budget supermarkets are of higher quality than foods from elsewhere.

"I shop in (budget supermarket) now which I never did before, in all fairness their fruit and veg is a lot fresher than in other supermarkets so I don't feel like I am missing out."

"The good thing that has come out of this is that more people are buying local produce rather than buying stuff that comes out of Europe."

"I buy local for freshness and quality. I also buy a lot of stuff second hand now, locally. I can get it immediately and don't have to wait for delivery."

"I shop in (budget supermarket) and they source their meat in Southern or NI but most supermarkets don't and the quality of meat in these supermarkets is really terrible now."

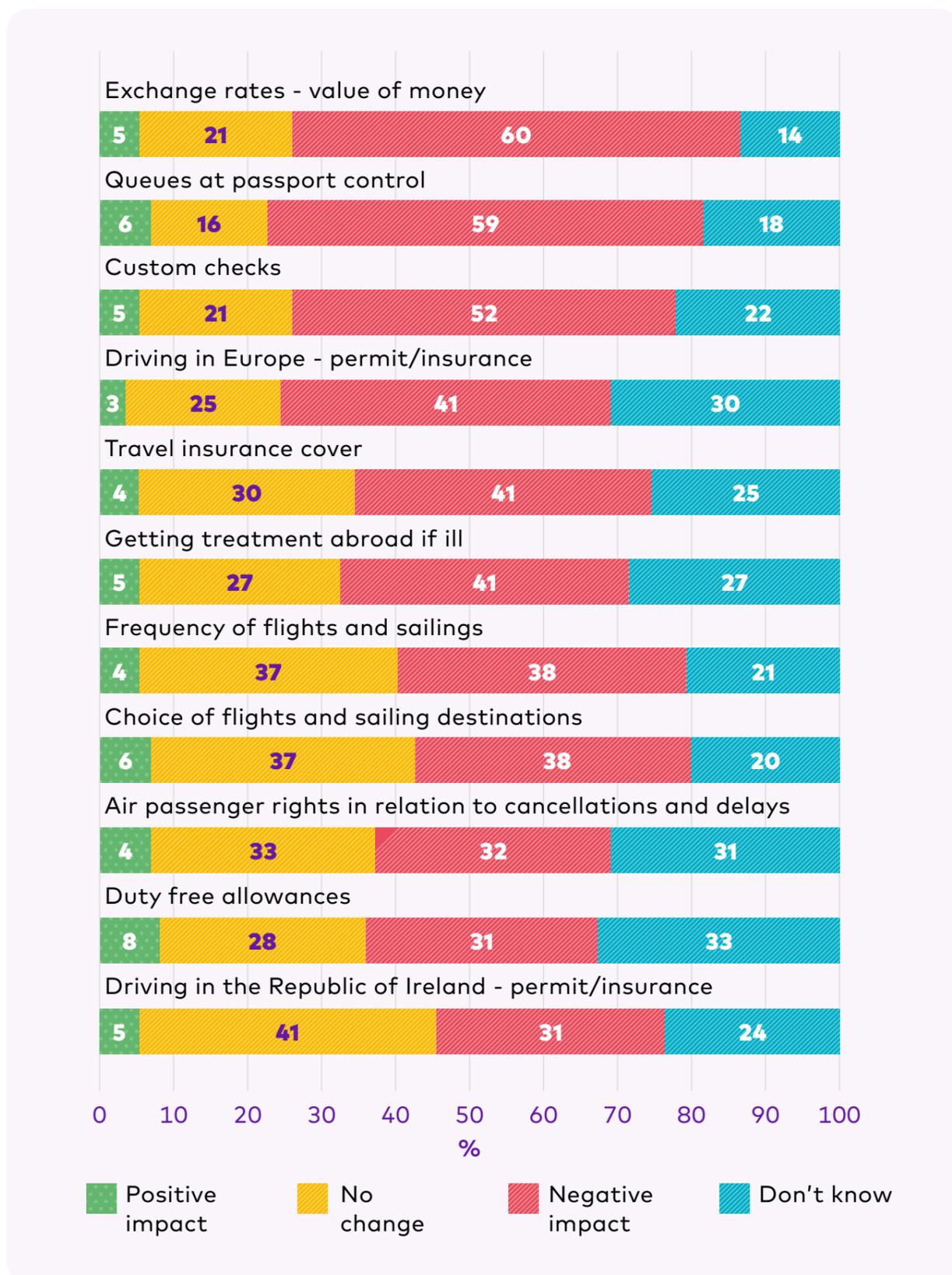


## 8. Travel

- 8.1 At the time this research took place, all COVID-19 based travel restrictions had been lifted. The 2021 and 2022 research coincided with COVID-19 travel restrictions therefore consumers found it difficult to determine if changes to their travel arrangements were due to COVID-19 or EU Exit. Therefore, the 2023 research can more accurately gauge consumer experiences of travel and how they have been impacted by EU Exit.
- 8.2 The current survey (as well as previous surveys) showed that significant numbers of consumers believe that EU Exit will have a negative impact on their travel arrangements, with most saying that exchange rates – value for money (60%) will be negatively impacted, queues at passport control will be negatively impacted (59%) and customs checks will be negatively impacted (52%). As with the 2022 survey, relatively few consumers (8% or less) believe that EU Exit will have a positive impact on their travel arrangements.



Figure 10: EU Exit's (perceived) impact on travel (n=1011)



8.3 Our qualitative research also revealed cases of delays at airports for people with non-EU passports. In addition, some people mentioned that holiday deals that were available prior to EU Exit are now harder to get and others said that the cost of holiday insurance has gone up.

"I have two passports, so I just use my Irish one when I travel in Europe. It makes things so much easier."

"I used to use (travel booking website) to book holidays but since Brexit they don't offer as many deals traveling from Belfast or Dublin."

"I had to have my UK passport checked and stamped so I was held up a bit. The ones in our party with Irish passports sailed through."

"Travel insurance is much dearer since Brexit; I work in the travel industry and I know this for a fact."

8.4 On a positive note, and compared with the 2022 survey, consumer awareness of changes to passports (e.g. passport has to have at least six months validity remaining and is less than 10 years old) as a result of EU Exit is up from 47% to 64%. Awareness of Global Health Insurance Cards (GHICs) when travelling in EU countries is also up from 46% to 52%.

8.5 However, travel remains and area in which consumers state that they require more information regarding changes with EU Exit (82% of respondents stated that they require travel information in 2023, compared with 63% in 2022<sup>19</sup>).

<sup>19</sup> See figure 3.

## 9. Mobile roaming

9.1 The European Union (EU) abolished roaming charges within member countries on 15 June 2017 and updated a series of further roaming regulations to help customers make informed roaming decisions and to protect against unexpectedly high roaming bills and inadvertent/unintended roaming<sup>20</sup>.

9.2 As a result of EU Exit, these regulations and protections are no longer mandatory in the United Kingdom (UK) including Northern Ireland (NI).

### Data roaming after EU Exit

9.3 The removal of mandatory mobile roaming regulations and protections following EU Exit have fundamentally changed how consumers across the UK use their phone when travelling abroad. This is because, from 1 January 2021 onwards, the majority of the UK's most popular mobile providers reintroduced roaming charges to the EU and European Economic Area (the EU plus Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway).

9.4 The most popular mobile providers are not currently charging for roaming between NI and the Republic of Ireland (ROI), but this could change at any time.

### Roaming protections after EU Exit

9.5 After EU Exit, certain consumer protections in the *EU Roaming Regulation* were retained in UK law but ceased to apply from 1 July 2022 onwards. This included protections such as:

- automatically notifying customers when they start using data roaming services;
- applying a default £45 per month (excluding VAT) spend cap for data roaming and notifying customers when they reach 80% and 100% of the cap; and
- informing customers of the risk of automatic and uncontrolled data roaming connections/downloads and how to switch off automatic data roaming.

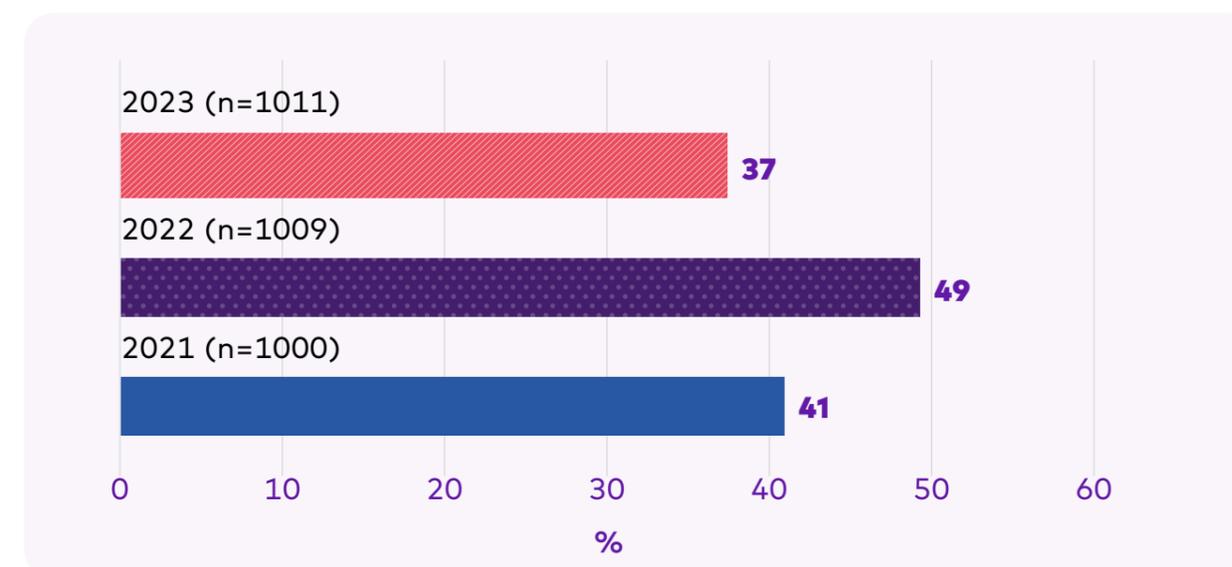
9.6 Mobile providers are voluntarily continuing to follow these rules, and the regulator Ofcom is currently consulting on mobile roaming protection regulations.

### Research into mobile roaming

9.7 To understand the potential consumer impacts associated with changes to roaming protections and regulations, the Consumer Council has tracked consumer views on mobile roaming since 2021.

9.8 This research in 2023 found that over one-third of respondents (37%) stated that they believe mobile phone charges abroad will be negatively impacted by EU Exit. This is significantly fewer consumers compared with previous years (49% in 2022, 41% in 2021).

Figure 11: Consumers believing that mobile phone charges will be negatively impacted by EU Exit



<sup>20</sup> Inadvertent/unintended roaming is when a mobile phone automatically connects to a network in a neighbouring country, rather than the country that the customer is located in.

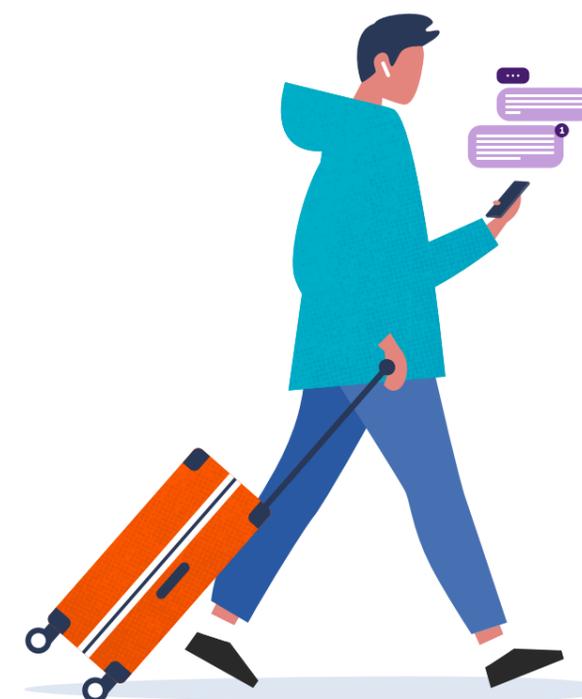
- 9.9 The Consumer Council embarked on a research project into mobile roaming<sup>21</sup> in March 2023. This research found that there was a high level of awareness, usage and positive sentiment towards roaming alerts and protections and that most consumers were aware of mobile roaming charges and took at least one preventative action before travelling. With only 9% of those who had travelled outside the UK in the last 12 months receiving an unexpected bill or charge for roaming, the impact of mobile roaming charges to consumers is currently low and the position for consumers has not changed since 2021 when the regulations were initially abolished.
- 9.10 Our qualitative work from this research ratifies the position on roaming charges, finding that some mobile phone users were unaffected by roaming charges when travelling. However, not all consumers remain unaffected with one consumer reporting charges as high as £6 per day.

"I was in Italy there in the summer and it came up on the phone that was free roaming so there was no problem. I was OK because I use (my provider) and they kept free roaming in place."

"A lot of providers have stopped EU roaming and I had to pay £6 a day."

"I have been hit with various roaming fees. I am in the northwest, and I am very conscious that roaming charges have started."

- 9.11 An issue specific to NI consumers is the potential for inadvertent/unintended roaming<sup>22</sup> across the NI/ROI border as a result of ROI remaining in the EU. The same issue can occur between the south of England and France, for example, but the land border between NI and ROI makes this more apparent as an issue due to the number of citizens here living and working close to the border.
- 9.12 The mobile roaming research found that 22% of NI consumers had experienced inadvertent/unintended roaming on the NI/ROI border, and about a third of those (32%) reported experiencing consequences as a result including being charged additional fees (14%) or having their services restricted (9%).
- 9.13 The mobile roaming landscape has developed over the last number of years. If mobile providers continue to allow free roaming between NI and ROI this will ensure the majority of mobile users in NI will not be adversely affected day to day by inadvertent roaming charges. Likewise, the continuation of roaming protections and alerts by mobile providers continue to provide NI consumers with the safeguards that were previously offered by the EU.
- 9.14 This consumer position remains temporary as future policy changes by mobile providers, could result in making more NI consumers vulnerable to detriment, especially those that live and work close to the NI/ROI border. The Consumer Council has used our mobile roaming research to respond to the Ofcom consultation on mobile roaming protections.



<sup>21</sup> Consumer Council, Mobile Roaming Experiences of Northern Ireland Consumers, March 2023.

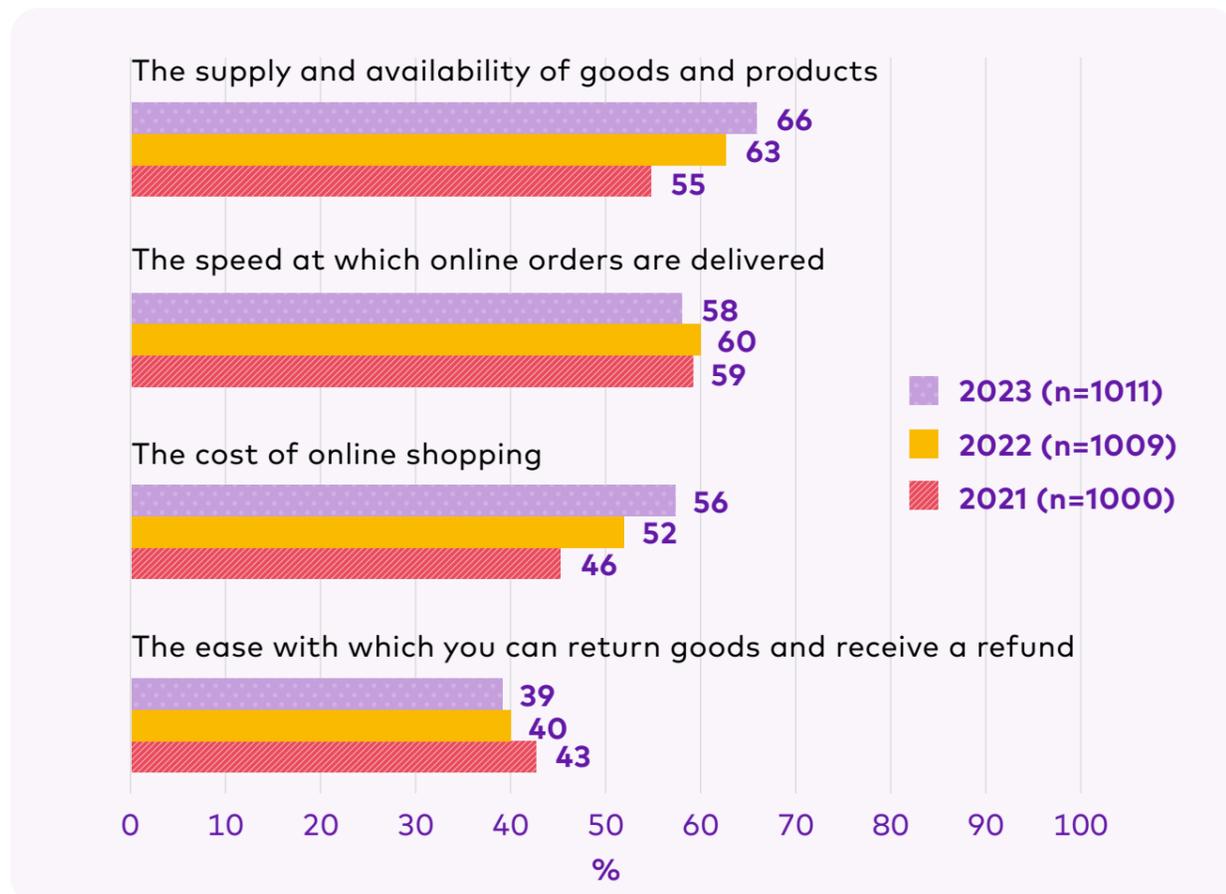
<sup>22</sup> Inadvertent/unintended roaming is when a mobile phone automatically connects to a network in a neighbouring country, rather than the country that the customer is located in.

# 10. Online shopping and retailers no longer delivering to NI

## Online shopping

10.1 Since 2021, a majority of consumers believe that EU Exit has had a negative impact on the supply and availability of goods and products, the speed at which online orders are delivered, and the cost of online shopping, with a greater number of consumers in the current survey reporting negative impacts in relation to supply and availability of goods and products (up from 63% in 2022 to 66% in 2023) and the cost of online shopping (up from 52% in 2022 to 56% in the current survey).

Figure 12: Consumers reporting negative impacts of EU Exit on online shopping

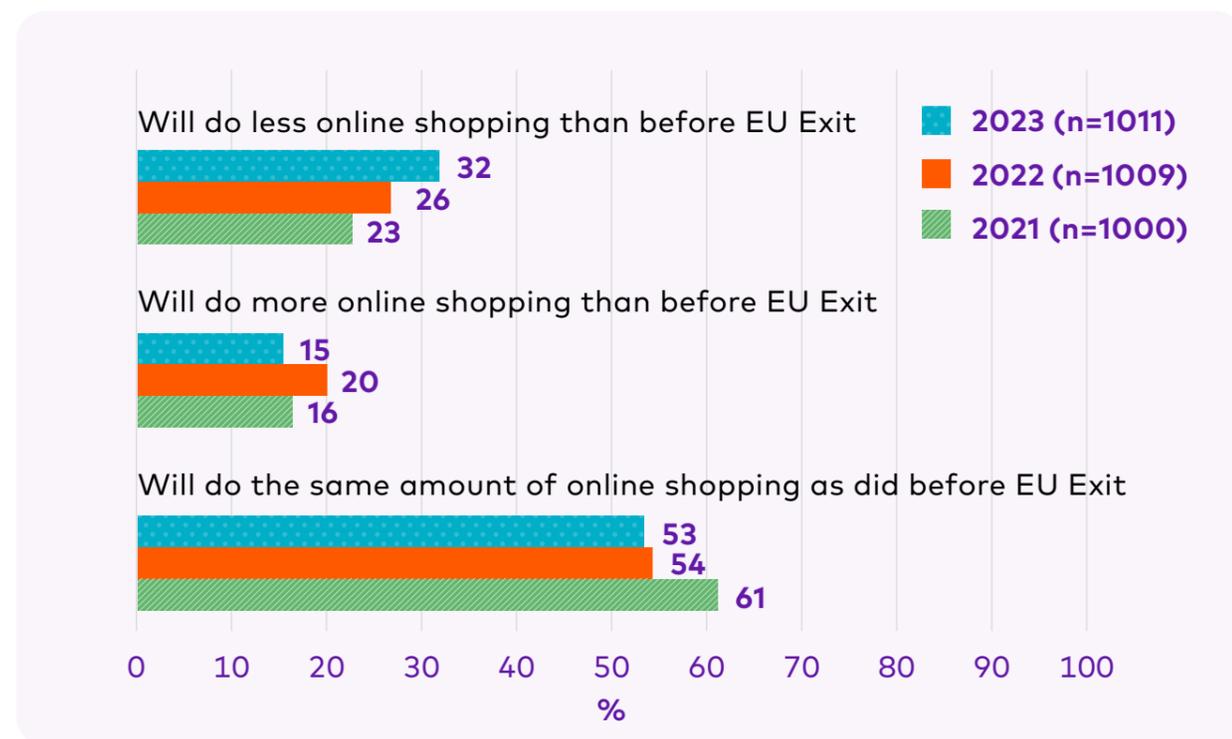


10.2 The qualitative research also revealed issues with some goods available in Great Britain (GB) not being available for delivery to Northern Ireland (NI):



10.3 Reflecting the challenges that consumers are facing with the current cost of living, there is some evidence that consumers are starting to restrict their online shopping, with 32% in the current survey saying they are doing less online shopping compared with 26% in 2022 and 23% in 2021.

Figure 13: Consumer online shopping levels compared with before EU Exit



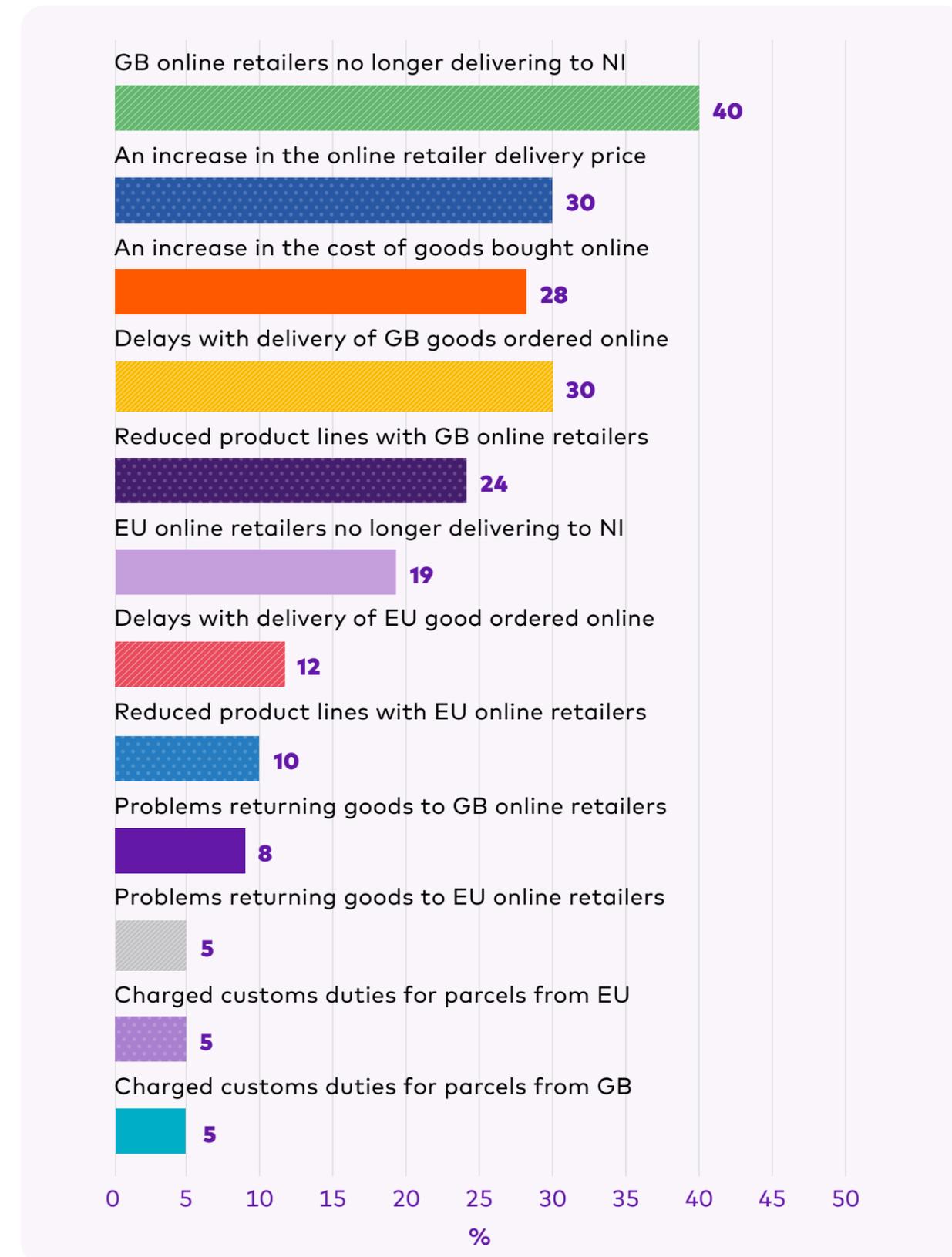
### Retailers no longer delivering to NI

10.4 Retailers no longer delivering to NI has been an area of concern monitored by the Consumer Council since January 2021. Research conducted by the Consumer Council has found that approximately nine out of ten (94%) consumers report shopping online. With the majority of these goods being purchased from GB retailers (75%)<sup>23</sup>.

10.5 Figure 14 shows that three out of ten consumers (30%) reported an increase in online delivery prices. Almost one in five (19%) respondents reported goods no longer being delivered from European Union (EU) online retailers, with 12% reporting delivery delays with EU goods.

10.6 However, the most common experience reported by consumers was GB retailers who no longer deliver to NI (40%), with 30% of respondents reporting delivery delays with GB goods bought online. Despite GB retailers no longer delivering to NI being the most common consumer experience, this figure has seen a significant drop compared to previous years (77% in 2022, 68% in 2021).

Figure 14: In the last 12 months, have you experienced any of the following?



<sup>23</sup> Consumer Council, Impact of EU Exit on Postal Consumers, May 2023.

10.7 Since January 2021, the Consumer Council has monitored, as accurately as it can, the number of GB retailers that have ceased to deliver to NI citing EU Exit as the reason. Our data shows a continued trend with GB retailers resuming delivery to NI<sup>24</sup>. This may explain why only 40% of respondents are reporting GB retailers no longer delivering to NI, compared with higher figures in previous years.

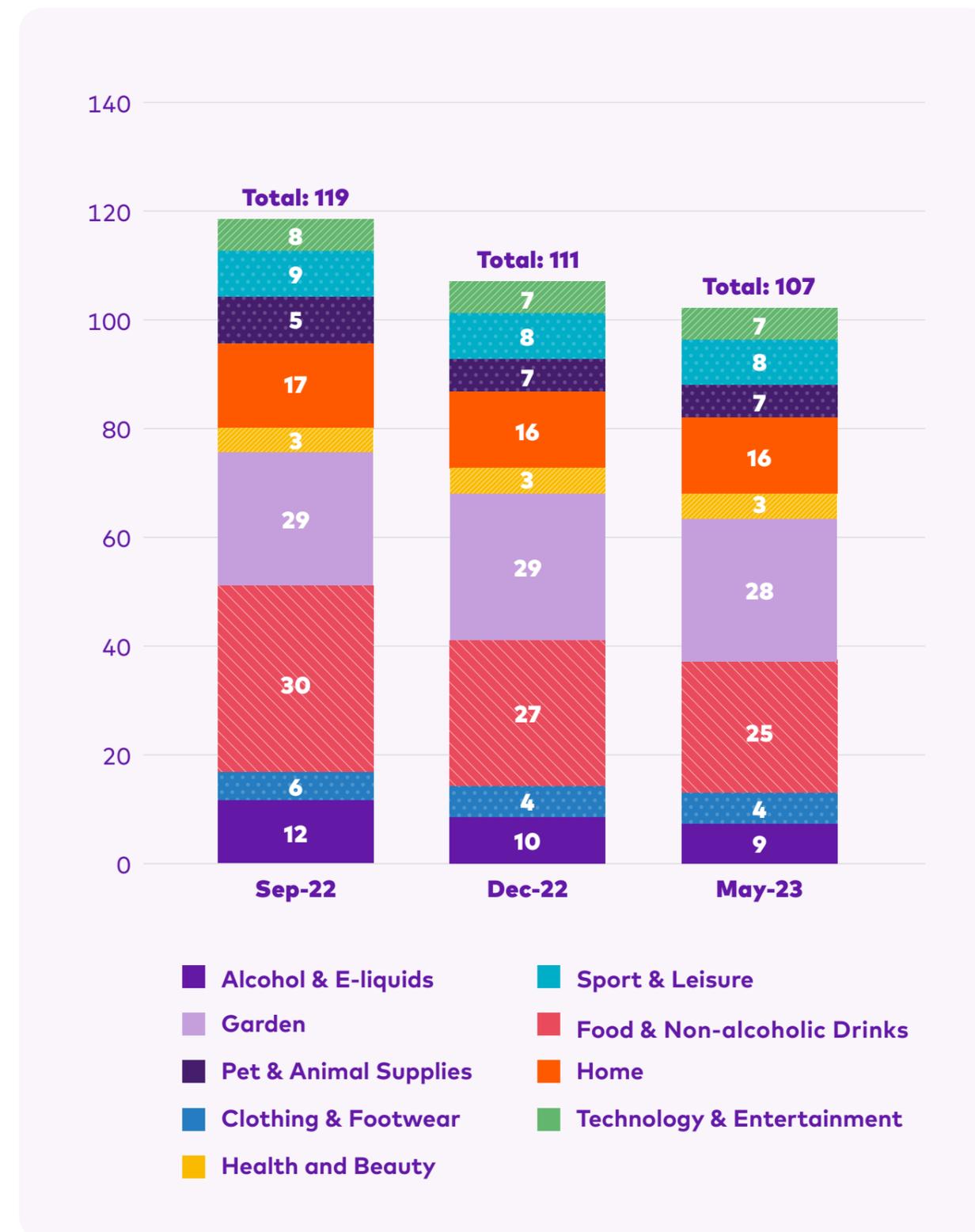
10.8 Figure 15 shows a breakdown of retailers not delivering, by sector, between September 2022 and May 2023. A full history of these recorded figures can be found on our website<sup>25</sup>. As figure 15 shows, more retailers have resumed delivery within the last year. The sectors most impacted and unable to deliver to NI due to EU Exit, remains the 'garden', 'food and non-alcoholic drinks' and 'home' sectors.

10.9 As of June 2023 we are aware of approximately 95-107 businesses 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 (95-107). This reflects the 95 businesses that have indicated non-delivery due to EU Exit, and an additional 12 businesses that are not delivering to Northern Ireland but have not confirmed this is specifically due to EU Exit.

10.10 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.



Figure 15: GB retailers no longer delivering to NI by sector



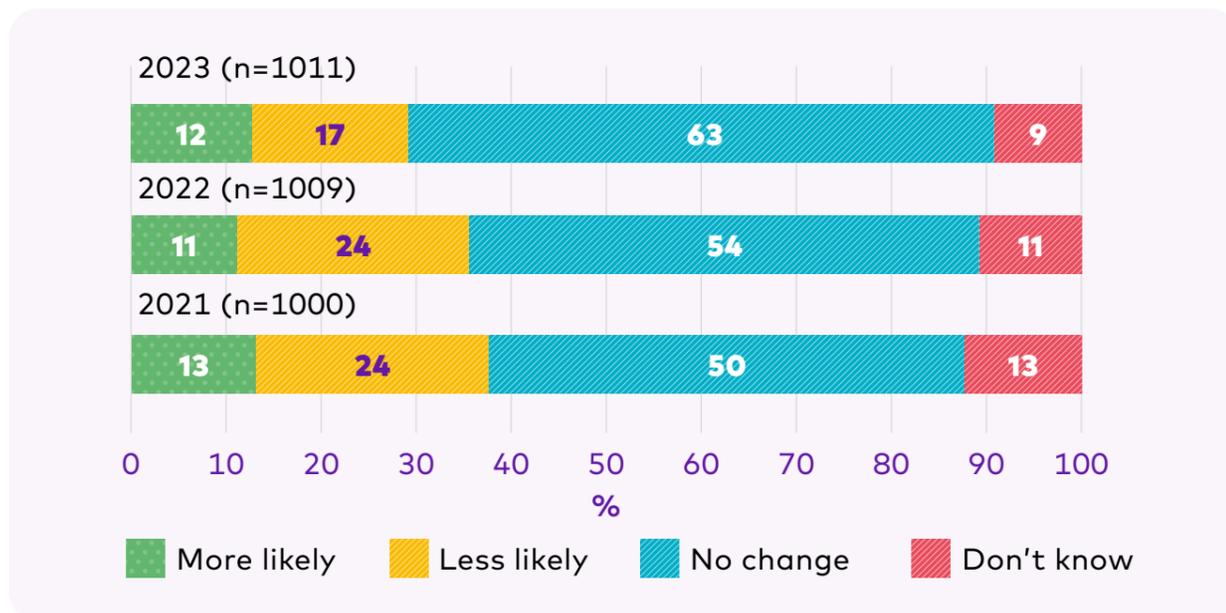
<sup>24</sup> See figure 15.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/policy-research/publications/overview-note-gb-retailers-not-delivering-ni-1>

# 11. Cross border shopping

11.1 Our research continues to monitor the impact of EU Exit on cross border shopping with the pattern reasonably consistent across the different surveys, albeit there has been a fall in the proportion of consumers saying they are less likely to travel across the border to shop (down from 24% in previous surveys to 17% in the current survey).

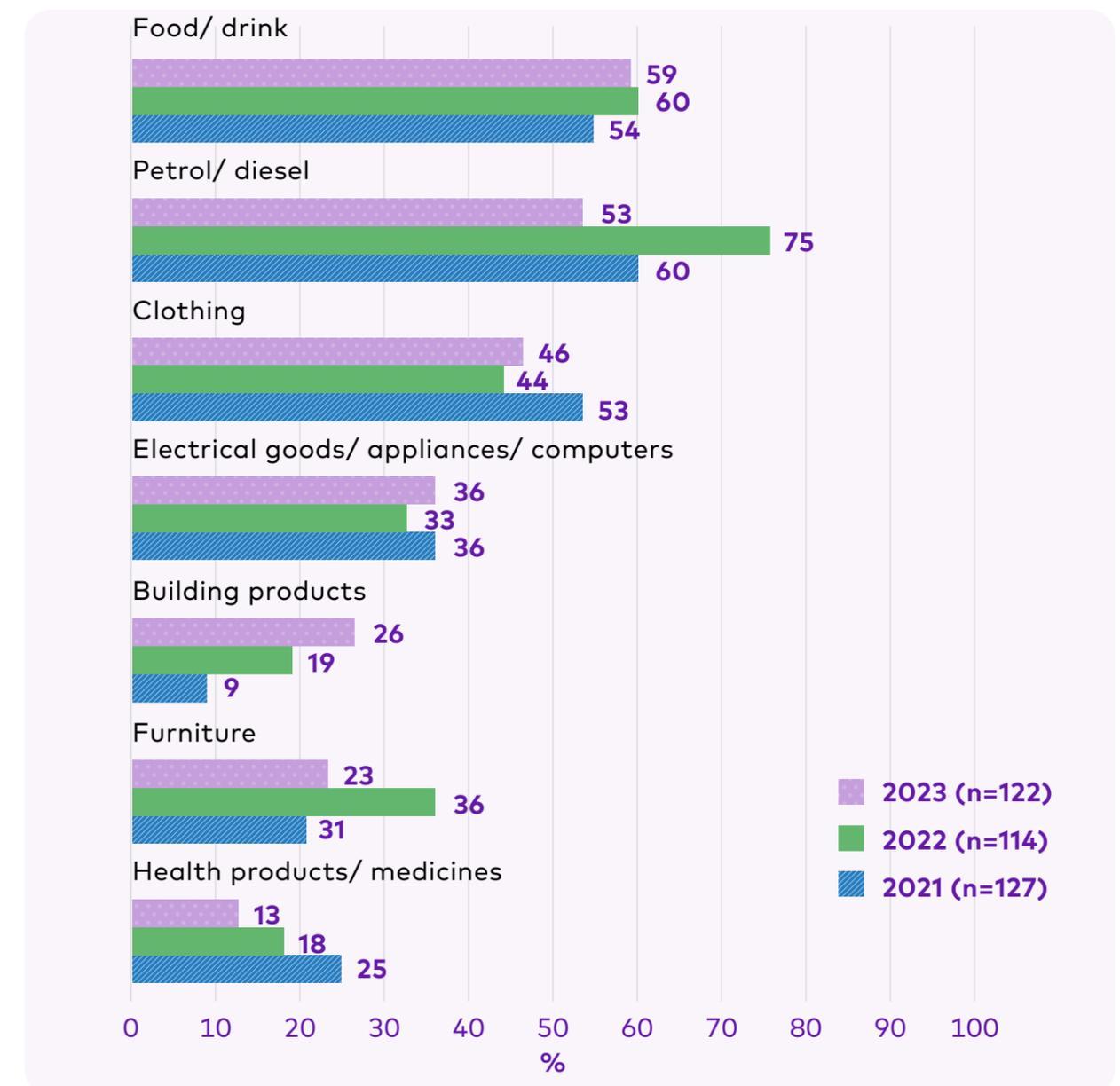
Figure 16: As a result of leaving the EU are you more or less likely to travel across the border to purchase goods or services in ROI?



11.2 Of those who stated they are more likely to cross the border to purchase goods or services, the top reasons for doing so were: cheaper goods and services (63%); more choice and availability (57%); convenience (12%); and avoiding customs duties and tariffs (27%).

11.3 In the current survey, food and drink (59%) is the most common item consumers are more likely to cross the border to purchase, followed by petrol and diesel (53%) and clothing (46%). Compared with 2022, there has been a fall in the number of consumers saying they are more likely to cross the border to purchase petrol and diesel (down from 75% in 2022 to 53% in the current survey). However, crossing the border to purchase building products is at its highest level compared with previous years (26% compared with 19% in 2022 and 9% in 2021).

Figure 17: Why are you more likely to cross the border to shop? (goods)



## 12. Conclusion

- 12.1 Our research continues to provide insights into Northern Ireland (NI) consumers' perceptions and experiences of EU Exit. Consumers once again identified a number of areas they attribute to EU Exit including price increases and a reduction in choice due to reduced availability of certain products in NI and through online shopping channels.
- 12.2 Rising prices dominated most areas of discussion, with higher costs on: food, travel, postage, mobile phone charges and consumers' ability to save money. The latest study shows a significant reduction in the number of people who say they will be able to absorb further price rises.
- 12.3 The percentage of respondents attributing EU Exit to negative shopping experiences has increased across the three survey years particularly in the area of food. Consumers reported a significant increase in food costs, empty shelves, shorter use by dates and the unavailability of certain products in NI. In response, consumers are changing their shopping habits including shopping more frequently, locally for fresh produce, shopping in budget supermarkets and choosing cheaper brands.
- 12.4 Whilst government is seen to have responsibility for disseminating information, the need was again 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 that may impact consumers' rights and to represent their concerns. The Consumer Council will continue to monitor how EU Exit impacts NI consumers and will continue to empower the consumer to challenge poor service and any infringement on their rights and protections.
- 12.5 In the area of travel, consumers report rises in the price of holiday packages, less choice in the holiday market and higher travel insurance costs. Consumers with United Kingdom (UK) passports have experienced delays at ports of entry to European Union (EU) countries because their passports are being checked for validity and stamped. Some consumers report that they have obtained Irish passports specifically for the purpose of easier entry into EU countries.
- 12.6 Fewer consumers believed this year that mobile phone charges will be negatively impacted by EU Exit. This is an area that the Consumer Council continued to monitor with additional research and engagement with the regulator Ofcom. The Consumer Council continues to publish information and guidance on mobile roaming charges to help consumers.
- 12.7 Online shopping continues to be significantly affected by EU Exit. A majority of consumers say that there have been negative impacts on supply and availability of goods and products, the speed at which online orders are delivered and the cost of online shopping.
- 12.8 Great Britain (GB) online marketplaces are hugely important to NI consumers with approximately nine out of ten (94%) consumers shopping online, with our research showing that three-quarters (75%) of online shopping is being purchased from GB retailers. Consumers continue to report GB retailers who no longer deliver to NI, reduced product lines from GB retailers and/or delivery delays from GB. Therefore, we propose that further research be conducted to ascertain the extent to which GB businesses are not delivering to NI due to EU Exit and the reasons for these decisions. This research could also supplement our desktop research into GB retailers no longer delivering to NI, provide a more comprehensive retailer list and give insight into online marketplaces and their delivery issues.
- 12.9 There has been little change in cross border shopping habits since the last survey. For those who do engage in cross border shopping, the benefits are seen as cheaper goods and services, more choice and availability, convenience, and avoiding customs duties and tariffs.
- 12.10 As with previous waves of the research, the main concerns for consumers are the economy of NI and 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 impact 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 remain aware of areas of potential detriment.
- 12.12 It is clear that consumers in NI continue to face challenges. Negative impacts on consumers must be monitored and addressed both now and in the future. The evidence from this research will support the Consumer Council to work collaboratively with governments and stakeholders to inform and influence policy making in a way that prevents detriment, supports early intervention and delivers positive outcomes for all consumers across NI.





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