

UK negotiating objectives for withdrawal from the European Union Inquiry

House of Commons Exiting the European Union Committee

Which? is the largest consumer organisation in the UK with more than 1.5 million members and supporters. We operate as an independent, apolitical, social enterprise working for all consumers and funded solely by our commercial ventures. We receive no government money, public donations, or other fundraising income. Which?'s mission is to make individuals as powerful as the organisations they have to deal with in their daily lives, by empowering them to make informed decisions and by campaigning to make people's lives fairer, simpler and safer.

1. Which? welcomes this opportunity to submit evidence on the UK negotiating objectives for withdrawal from the European Union to inform the Committee's oral evidence sessions. It is absolutely fundamental that consumer interests, rights and protections are prioritised in the negotiations on our relationship with the European Union (EU) and the wider world.
2. Consumers spend on average almost £100 billion each month¹ and so consumer confidence is fundamental for economic growth. Five key over-arching principles must be upheld as part of the negotiations in order to protect consumer interests – and ensure that consumer confidence is maintained.
3. Firstly, the Government must prevent consumers from being squeezed by price rises across different sectors. This includes key goods and services that consumers rely on and where we are currently heavily inter-connected with the EU, such as food and energy prices. Our consumer tracker² finds that the highest levels of consumer worry are currently being experienced in relation to energy prices (64%) and fuel prices (64%), followed by food prices (53%).
4. Secondly, essential consumer rights must be maintained. Many of the rights that consumers have come to expect – as well as those that they may not be aware of until they need them - have been shaped and determined at EU level. These range from

¹ Consumer Trends, Office for National Statistics. Average monthly consumer expenditure (Current Price Value) for Quarters 1 and 2 (January - June), 2016 was £99bn.

² Fieldwork was conducted 16-17 November 2016. The Which? Consumer Insight Tracker is a nationally representative online survey of around 2,000 UK households every other month.

rights to compensation for delayed flights, roaming charges, protections against unfair trading and private international law protections. Consumers need to continue to have access to a range of products and services, confident that there is no undermining of consumer rights – including when making cross-border transactions - and where appropriate, opportunities to enhance these protections should be taken.

5. Consumer protection and safety must be safeguarded. This includes maintaining a robust system for product safety and standards - and ensuring that key principles established through EU law, such as the precautionary principle, are not undermined. This will be particularly important when negotiating trade agreements with countries that have lower standards of protection and less independent oversight or if operating under a World Trade Organisation regime where the international standards that it recognises may be lower than EU or UK standards.
6. Consumer rights and protections must be supported by a robust system of consumer enforcement. In a globalised trading system, maintaining collaboration, co-operation and intelligence sharing with other countries and their enforcement bodies will be crucial. If the UK is no longer part of EU arrangements - such as the Consumer Protection Co-operation (CPC) network or its rapid alert systems for issues such as consumer product safety, food safety and fraud (RAPEX and RASFF) - alternatives will be required. New arrangements will also be needed to ensure that imports are compliant with relevant legislation – particularly where the UK is currently reliant on European Commission oversight and inspection of third country compliance.
7. Finally, consumers must have a seat at the table. Consumer interests have to be understood and addressed from the outset of the negotiations. Consumers and consumer representatives should be fully engaged in exploring the implications of different options and assessing how any trade-offs can be balanced.
8. Which? has asked consumers about their views on the official Brexit meetings and negotiations. This found that 72% thought that the interests of consumers were either very or fairly important. However, only 31% expected consumers' interests to be represented. The Government must ensure that this is not the case and that the consumer perspective is a priority.

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