

National Trade Conversation

East Coast Scotland

Introduction

The UK is developing trade policy and negotiating trade deals as an individual country for the first time in over 40 years. The success of these new deals will ultimately depend on the extent to which they deliver on what matters most to people in their everyday lives. Rigorous consumer research and insight sit at the heart of how Which? champions consumers' interests, and so the National Trade Conversation was commissioned to get an in-depth understanding of consumers' priorities for trade deals. It gave people a unique opportunity to say what their priorities are when the breadth of issues that could be part of trade talks are explained. Our key research question for the National Trade Conversation was:

What matters to people about the consumer aspects of the UK's trade deals, when the risks and benefits are explained?

The National Trade Conversation uniquely engaged people from around the country and from all walks of life. By involving key experts, government departments and interest groups, people were able to go beyond what initially appeared as a highly specialised area, and explore in-depth how the UK trades, how trade deals work and what issues could be on the table.

The research used a deliberative approach. In partnership with deliberation experts, Hopkins Van Mil, we conducted online dialogues in five locations across the UK, engaging with 97 people recruited to reflect a cross section of each locale. The process - involving over 12 hours of information sessions, facilitated discussions and reflective tasks, across two weeks - gave participants an opportunity to explore trade deals in great depth.

This report covers the findings from our research conducted in East Coast Scotland and surrounds. 18 participants took part in workshops, held between the 7th September and 18th September 2020. Whilst there was a remarkable amount of common ground across the five dialogues in five different locations in the UK, each location had their own distinctive response to our key research question.

Priorities

UK wide priorities and principles

Throughout the research, we asked participants to think about *the consumer aspects of trade deals that matter most to them*. Looking across all five locations, we identified four key priorities that consumers had for future trade deals. Our question asked about the consumer aspects of trade deals, but it is clear from their priorities and the principles that underpin them, that for our participants, being a consumer is interwoven with wider views of being a citizen of the UK. These priorities were shared by most participants in most locations.

The UK wide priorities were:

1) Maintain health and safety standards for food and products

The issue which mattered most, and dominated discussions of consumer goods was the importance of maintaining existing standards –particularly those relating to safety and health.

“I think safety is a very, very big part for UK citizens, whether it be purchasing food, pharmaceutical, data transmission.”

East Coast Scotland

“We are lucky to have high standards across the board from food to data protection in the UK - we don't want to compromise these.”

East Coast Scotland

“Please make we don't compromise our standards just for the sake of a deal.”

East Coast Scotland

2) Maintain data security regulations that protect consumers rights

There were widely held concerns about what the implications might be for consumers if data protection and online consumer rights were removed.

"In 2016 over 700,000 cases of cyber fraud were recorded. That's shocking statistic to me. I think this makes high standards of data protection ever so important to ensure that consumers can trade digitally but securely."

East Coast Scotland

3) Help address regional inequalities by protecting and promoting jobs, skills and industries across the UK

Participants wanted to see trade deals help all parts of the UK to thrive – not just London and the South East – and for all UK citizens across the country to benefit by boosting jobs and protecting/promoting any industries put at risk by future deals – with farming a particular worry for people. Participants in Scotland had already witnessed job losses and financial hardship related to the pandemic and did not want this to be exacerbated by future trade deals. They wanted government to help start-up businesses in new sectors and support those who would need to re-skill if their industry loses out.

"At the top of the list is the protection of jobs and, hopefully, an increase of jobs. The reason for that is everyone needs a job, it's our economy, it makes our country grow, it means we have more money to spend on services, for example the NHS, so jobs is the top of our list."

East Coast Scotland

I think, what should the UK get out of trading with other people? It could potentially have a positive impact on the UK in terms of it will make them concentrate fully on the people, and create more opportunities for the people themselves to flourish.

East Coast Scotland

4) Protect the environment

Participants wanted to see that the UK's trade deals align with our environmental and sustainability targets. Across the groups in East Coast Scotland they discussed the desirability of lowering tariffs on green products such as electric cars, minimising air miles, and reducing carbon emissions. The participants welcomed the specific focus by some countries on incorporating environmental protection into negotiating priorities.

"The government negotiations should include environmental protection issues. In other words, you're trying to get the planet cleaner."

East Coast Scotland

There were also 4 overarching principles which underpinned participant priorities:

Fairness: A trade deal should do all it can to be beneficial for all involved: to governments, industries and citizens on both sides. The UK has a duty of fairness particularly when making trade deals with smaller, developing economies but they appreciate this is a tricky balance to strike.

“One size cannot fit all. Whilst the government tries to put the heart of consumers at the core of trade, some consumers will benefit and others will lose at the cost of some trade deals ...”

East Coast Scotland

“I know we’ve spoken a lot about quality of goods and food, but lower labour standards are something we wouldn’t want to be encouraging as well. Maybe it’s not standards of labour in this country, it could be where we’re buying from we don’t want to be condoning that either.”

East Coast Scotland

Longevity/Future proofed: In a world that is changing so quickly, participants thought that the UK should be thinking of the long term, scanning the horizon for new opportunities and agreeing deals that can adapt to a range of environmental, technological and social changes yet to be fully understood but necessary to anticipate. Long term sustainability was deemed to be key, with a view to agreeing deals that deliver a world in which we want our children and their children to inherit.

“For whatever we are trying to do, we should focus on the fact that tomorrow the people are very key, and so looking at everything everybody has said, that should be a big motivator to really do the right thing.”

East Coast Scotland

“For me, a lot of people that I know have changed during this Covid pandemic and it’s looking at what people’s needs and wants are.... so trying to future-proof it, not tying yourself in too tightly either so that you’ve got a deal for, say, 10 years that’s no use to you after 5?”

East Coast Scotland

“We were talking about the availability and sustainability of supply. Not just looking at the immediate, 'We need this.' It's about making sure that we can still get it for the next decade, five decades, whatever time frame that they look at. There's much longer-term planning that needs to be done.”

East Coast Scotland

Representing the whole of the UK: Trade deals are perceived as English-centric and lack representation from devolved nations. People wanted reassurance that each nation’s voice is heard, fully considered and represented in trade deal negotiations. This was a prominent theme in our discussions in East Coast Scotland.

“The government cannot just make these deals on their own as it's a new phase for everyone. Involving crucial members like the heads of the national coalition of supermarkets, heads of farmers, low-income families.. to really understand what everyone needs.”

East Coast Scotland

“We've got to be included, because we've got to consider things like shipping to Ireland, to Orkney, Shetland, because I know as it is they pay a lot more for things getting to them. So all of that kind of thing being taken into deals as well.”

East Coast Scotland

Transparency: Participants felt that consumers are largely excluded from trade deal negotiations and are left with little understanding about the process and outcomes. They felt trade deals need to be made more transparent for consumers on a number of levels. Firstly, they felt at an over-arching level that more honesty about who might be the winners and losers of new deals is required, particularly as they felt certain Scottish interests need to be reflected upon and considered. Secondly, participants wanted more transparency on how changes brought on by new trade deals might affect them more directly, such as different food or other product standards:

“ I think all the other stuff falls apart without transparency, and all the arguments about standard state of protection and choice, anything like that - if transparency on all that isn't being offered then how can we trust...standards,

data protection, choices, security and safety of consumers. I wouldn't just take any of it for granted just because I was told it [was in place]."

East Coast Scotland

Scottish priorities

When we decided to move the National Trade Conversation online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we also decided to commission some visual minutes of the events. Below is the output of our discussions in East Coast Scotland.



Each of the three small discussion groups in East Coast Scotland developed their priorities during the final workshop and they were shared in plenary at the end of the session. Before deciding on their top 5 priorities, participants were asked to think about the content of all the previous workshops and online tasks and to identify what was most important to them. As a result, these priorities are the outcome of participants deliberating the wide range of evidence that was presented to them about the opportunities and risks to consumers as a result of trade deals. The table below shows the priorities in East Coast Scotland split by discussion group.

<i>Group 1 priorities</i>	<i>Group 2 priorities</i>	<i>Group 3 priorities</i>
<p>Standards: Maintain existing safety and health standards on food (particularly meat) and non-food products as these current standards are based on sound science. Additionally, the Government should agree to implementing alert systems for unsafe products.</p>	<p>Good standards and safety protections: From all countries with whom we do trade deals - this is for all products and services, and in all digital trading activities that affect consumers.</p>	<p>Maintain current health & safety standards for food: We should not force people on low incomes to resort to food which may be less safe –with particular reference to hormone beef.</p>
<p>Data protection: Security and safety of consumers particularly around digital trade. Prefer to agree standards between countries as close to GDPR as possible and not let companies decide.</p>	<p>A good deal on digital trade: UK companies to be given a 50/50 chance abroad to expand such as our telecoms companies expanding into overseas markets, and creating jobs.</p>	<p>Maintain or improve data protection: Other countries will want to trade with us under current terms.</p>
<p>Meaningful choice: Increase access to new products and services but with no loss in standards. People want choice that is not based on poor welfare, social or environmental practice.</p>	<p>Environmental protections: Including reduced tariffs on green products that will bring health and climate benefits.</p>	<p>Maintain and improve animal welfare: Protect the ban on animal testing.</p>
<p>Transparency: Not just about changes in standards (e.g. what's being imported across all food and non-food items) but in how deals might impact people differently, and how the terms of deals will be adhered to.</p>	<p>Reduction on tariffs: Where it will be good to promote the sale of UK goods or services abroad e.g. cars, industrial machinery, arts and entertainment services (including digital). But also lower to help bring in cheaper parts, ingredients or components we need for manufacture or to lower the price of green goods or practices.</p>	<p>Expand UK services into as many new markets as possible: The key growth will be in services, especially digital services and deals should help to upskill local workers.</p>
<p>Protect Scottish industries and jobs: In particular, the food and drink industry (which is the main export for Scotland) including farming and the countryside.</p>	<p>Protection of jobs and a boost in jobs - skill up young Scottish young people and help to support our key public services including NHS.</p>	<p>Ensure British goods aren't undermined by lower standards of imports: The UK and Scotland has world renowned products and services that we should protect and promote.</p>

There were a number of priorities that were present in all three Scottish groups.

Firstly, **maintaining existing health and safety standards** for imported food and goods to protect consumers was clearly an important priority for all our Scottish participants. While they were not entirely opposed to accepting different standards in the future, they needed to be convinced that changes would be based on good evidence.

“Those people in the UK government, those going to do the trade deals, do any of them have much knowledge in terms of food produce? Do any of them have hard science knowledge in these kinds of things? It's very easy to be so focused on business deals ... than looking at the side effect of whatever we bring in, and that's what I think is very key. ... the impact it could also have on consumers, should we decide to not really focus much on the standard of the produce [coming in]?”

East Coast Scotland

Secondly, all groups wanted to increase digital trade given its growing importance but they wanted to maintain data protection standards and seek closer alignment between countries on the safety and security of consumer data.

“The new PlayStation... is just pure digital, there are no disks, there's no anything. It's just all on an online server, and the problem with that is, in the past, the PlayStation network actually got hacked for a year. Sony's network got hacked for an entire year and nobody could access online games or anything like that, and so I feel that as time goes on and it gets a bit more digital, it is becoming a major risk to not have it as a priority.”

East Coast Scotland

Thirdly, participants felt strongly that trade deals should benefit people across the UK and for them, this meant protecting and promoting Scottish industry such as food and drink (e.g. Scotch whisky and gin), farming (beef, salmon), transport services (shipping, in particular) and tourism – but also creating local jobs in newer industries we want to develop. This was a priority across all three groups. The focus was particularly on opportunities for young people.

A good example would be Scotch whisky. People are buying it because it's made in Scotland. If you're getting a cheaper make of this, it's not real, for a start, and

it's also affecting our trade and our jobs, and our reputation. I just completely disagree with that.

East Coast Scotland

Lastly, there were passionate debates around whether **increasing choice** was a key consumer priority for deals but in the end widening access was a priority in group 1 only, and with many caveats – as indicated in the table above.

It's worth noting there was a range of views expressed in East Coast Scotland on choice, price and quality and the process gave the topics plenty of airtime because people were so passionate about debating the importance of these consumer issues. Participants liked the idea of more access to goods and services and to take advantage of them at lower prices, especially as times are very hard during this economic downturn and Covid lockdown. But this was caveated by people stating they want informed choice and to ensure that cheaper products or services entering UK markets do not present risks to health and safety if standards changed. This would not be fair on poorer consumers and could result in wider problems in communities and society such as poor public health, lesser protections, and poorer public safety for those who feel compelled to buy cheaper.

"Again, a lot of focus on cost and getting things cheaper - "nearly everyone benefits from lower prices".Of course if the same quality goods can be bought cheaper that it's a good thing but buying cheap can lead to problems and money wasted by needing to buy again e.g. recent bulk purchases of PPE."

East Coast Scotland

"For my family, I would like to have better choices at cheaper prices but, at the same time, not compromising on standards. That's right across the board, for food, cars, data."

East Coast Scotland

"For me and my family I would like to see overall competitive fair pricing with a standard that is acceptable and not compromised."

East Coast Scotland

“Good to have more choice, if the guarantees about quality are met I don’t think personally we really need much more choice, but for a lot of people it could be good to have more choice.”

East Coast Scotland

“Maybe I’m being too much of an idealist. I don’t see why, if you can’t afford it, you can’t have something that’s as good for you, your kids, or whatever.”

East Coast Scotland

Priorities

Food

We kicked off our food discussions with a video featuring a range of organisations with an interest in trade. In England, Wales and Scotland the video showed Which?, the Fair Trade Foundation, the National Farmers Union, Chatham House and the British Retail Consortium. After watching the video, participants talked about their views on the implications of trade deals on food. They discussed issues relating to increased choice, resilience, availability, the potential for lower prices through tariff reductions and were also given examples of food standards and how they differ in different countries (See the Appendices of the main report for further details). They were asked for their thoughts on the relative opportunities across the different deals, how issues such as standards, price and choice should be balanced, which standards should be maintained, or new ones adopted.

As is clear from each of the groups' priorities, maintaining food standards was one of the most important outcomes of future trade deals for Scottish participants. Similar reasons were given across all five locations as to why this was important. Participants were concerned that lower prices of imported food could cause harm both in the UK and in other trading nations - if not considered in the detail of trade deals - by:

- Impacting on health or safety of consumers
- Undercutting UK farmers and food producers
- Causing environmental harms
- Encouraging poor labour standards
- Undermining fair trade.

As indicated above there was a great deal of debate in East Coast Scotland on how important wider choice offered by importing food of different standards was a priority and a minority welcomed this - providing the choice is truly informed and offers something new such as good value for money. However, the overriding view was that

any potential benefits from increasing choice as a result of accepting food produced to lower standards were greatly outweighed by a number of disadvantages, as specified above. Many Scottish participants did not feel that cheaper food would actually benefit those on the lowest incomes, as they felt lower quality food would have a range of health and environmental implications. They would rather have foods guaranteed to a minimum standard so that no-one need be worried or lack confidence in the food they buy.

“I think knowing that we are safe and secure in all these processes gives us a sense of confidence. In the past, we’ve had the government to make all these decisions on our behalf.”

East Coast Scotland

“There’s also the issue of making sure that food is affordable or cheap, but sometimes when things are cheap there are a lot of compromises that go on to bring the prices down. I would rather there are no compromises and the food is little more pricey, and we get good quality.”

East Coast Scotland

Participants in Scotland also wondered whether the UK should be more self-sufficient in food production. They felt this would help boost the UK (and therefore Scottish) agricultural sector, and would help build resilience if there were future disruptions to supply chains. Many participants had experienced the temporary shortages on supermarket shelves, related to COVID-19, earlier in the year. Participants also thought eating more locally grown food had become the norm, as a way to support local communities and also to reduce the environmental impact of food consumption.

“I think a lot of supermarkets do like to sell locally. It’s a selling point for them, isn’t it? You see that advertised on the telly a lot, that supermarkets want to support local farmers maybe a bit more than they have in the past. So, I don’t think that would go..... People do still want to support their local farmers.”

East Coast Scotland

“The government should probably consider increasing their investment in the food production industry. I think this would potentially reduce prices for

consumers and also encourage local producers to export, a boost for our economy.”

East Coast Scotland

One theme which came out particularly strongly in East Coast Scotland – along with Northern Ireland and Wales – was the desire to protect farming from being undercut by the lower standards of production in other countries. Farming was thought to be an important part of the Scottish economy, as well as integral to local communities and their values. Fear of Scottish farmers being undercut by cheap meat was also mentioned when participants reviewed the trading objectives of the USA who want to increase the volume of meat exports to the UK.

“Ensuring British goods aren't undermined by lower standards, trying to retain the expertise or the great quality of stuff that we've got in this country. Some of the examples that we export and use within our own country at the moment are Aberdeen Angus beef, salmon, seafood...”

East Coast Scotland

The stakes were seen as particularly high in Scotland given that the food and drink industries play a vital role in the national economy and are the largest category of goods exports.

“That is our main trade here. If you take that away from us, what's left? We'll suffer.”

East Coast Scotland

“We [Scotland] have such a lot to lose, really. I think we do have a lot to lose if the standards are lowered. Because we've got so much land [to] farm. We produce a lot of our own stuff.”

East Coast Scotland

On a connected note, Scottish participants were very keen to protect geographical designations particularly but not exclusively on Scottish food and drink. They liked the notion of choice but don't want it if trade deals have facilitated unfair competition.

Animal welfare was also an important issue for our Scottish participants when they were discussing food:

“I want to be eating my food knowing that the animal itself didn't suffer in an inhumane way. They're not human, but they've still got feelings, emotions, etc. There's still places in America where they do have these unhygienic, not ethical at all, standards of living for these animals”.

East Coast Scotland

“We felt that maintaining or even improving animal welfare is key, and to re-negotiate for the standards to be dropped would be a step backwards for us.”

East Coast Scotland

Consumer Goods

Participants were introduced to cars and trade during workshop 3 (see appendices of main report) where they were shown a video which detailed how future trade deals could impact cars, which are the UK's biggest imported and exported good. Participants were also given a car summary sheet (see appendices of main report) in their workpacks providing further information on why trade deals matter when it comes to cars. After watching the video in their small groups, participants discussed what they thought were the most important trade implications for cars and why they are important. As a homework task following the workshop, participants watched a short video on trade and toiletries (see appendices of main report), noting down the issues that they felt were most significant. The toiletries video showed Which?, the Cosmetic, Toiletry & Perfumery Association (CTPA), The European Consumer Organisation (BEUC) and the British Retail Consortium.

As with the discussions about food, Scottish participants felt strongly that existing standards for consumer goods should be maintained and did not want to sacrifice this for more choice. They felt strongly that product safety – especially when it comes to vehicles and toiletries – should never be reduced through a trade deal. After learning about how standards can differ across countries, they thought that any trade deals made

should only improve standards and negotiators certainly shouldn't risk a reduction in the UK's current standards.

"I love that we have strict standards meaning I can choose products without fear of unlawful chemicals entering my system."

East Coast Scotland

Although participants wanted reasonable prices, they weren't prepared to sacrifice quality or safety in order to achieve this, and felt there was little need for more choice of consumer goods in the UK.

"I think it's important that we all have to work hard for our money so we want to know that what we're going to be spending it on is not going to be just thrown away.I think obviously people buy what they can afford. But, they should be all of a certain standard, I would say. Whether you're spending £10 or £100 on the item."

East Coast Scotland

It's worrying if you're going to buy a car [from USA] and not realising that safety standards are not the same as what you have been used to.

East Coast Scotland

When thinking about the prospect of changing standards, participants in East Coast Scotland were open minded if there was an agreed approach to finding common ground based on good scientific evidence.

"Toiletries: 1,600 banned substances versus 10. They're miles apart, but there's something in the middle there. We're maybe just too high but we don't want to be right at the bottom. Some place in the middle could well keep everybody happy."

East Coast Scotland

Participants in East Coast Scotland were also concerned about the regulation of online retailers who sold consumer goods, and did not want future trade deals to exacerbate this.

“That is worrying banned ingredients can still be found in products bought online.”

East Coast Scotland

“There need to be stricter laws on online marketplace sellers.”

East Coast Scotland

Digital trade

For the reflection task following workshop 3, we asked participants to watch a video about the growing importance of digital trade within modern trade agreements, and asked for their thoughts on what stood out for them. The same video was shown in all five locations featuring Which?, various experts from The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), and experts from the Open Rights Group. Participants were also given a hard copy summary sheet (see Appendices of main report) in their work packs that outlined: UK Government ambitions for digital trade, the volume of digital communications being made daily in the UK, UK data privacy through the use of GDPR and the differences in consumer protection between countries. The sheet posed the question about key trade-offs in this area: *Do we reduce our regulations in order to trade digitally with countries with lower standards, possibly resulting in a risk of lower safe guards?*

During workshop 4, we revisited a shorter version of the digital trade video as a refresh before discussing more fully how participants felt the issues raised would impact on trade deals and them. Our discussions around digital trade were similar across all five locations, with our Scottish participants having comparable responses to participants in other parts of the UK.

Much of the conversation around digital trade focused on two specific consumer areas that really struck a chord with participants:

- (i) the protections of consumer data transferred across borders
- (ii) consumers' rights relating to online (and therefore cross border) shopping and online services.

This particular focus dominated deliberations because almost everyone recognised the trends of increased consumption of services online and of the growing popularity of internet enabled devices and apps which results in more sharing of data with businesses. While people had low awareness of the full spectrum of ways in which data is collected about them, and how that data may affect their consumer lives, they were acutely aware it is valuable to businesses across the globe. Participants largely focused on data protections and online consumer rights because for the first time, some of them had only realised how much weaker standards are in other countries, particularly in the USA.

This is not to say that people did not see some economic and personal gains from digital trade with other nations. For future deals, participants felt that there was an opportunity for consumers to access some items at a cheaper price. This was particularly true for products where there were no immediate safety concerns, or for gaming or entertainment products where standards aren't an issue as the product remains largely the same across international boundaries.

Apart from a small number of these exceptions, many participants were quite cautious about unconditionally pursuing more free flowing data as part of new free trade agreements. When discussing their willingness to reduce current data privacy legislation in order to access the benefits of increased digital trade, most wanted more information as they could not see any immediate direct benefits, or felt they had plenty of access to digital services and goods online already:

"I would really not feel comfortable with giving away some of our trading, the digital rights. Going back to what [another participant] said about consumerism, how much access do you need? You can already buy things from all over the world."

East Coast Scotland

"The digital platforms will open us to more choices from world trading, but what would the cost be in terms of data protection. This could put the UK consumers in a vulnerable position when buying from the free trade market."

East Coast Scotland

The general response from participants was that they valued the privacy and protections afforded to them online by the existing GDPR regime and didn't want to see their existing digital rights eroded as part of future trade deals – in fact, some wanted to know what was going to be put in place in lieu of GDPR when new deals are struck, and whether the UK government would take the opportunity to improve on it.

"If it's that straightforward [enshrining GDPR into UK law], is it done? Why is it not done? Have we adopted it? For me, that's a problem. There's really no information about which EU laws we've adopted into UK law, and what the progress is."

East Coast Scotland

"I don't think we should reduce regulations in order to secure deals. If the safeguard was obviously set up, I think it would be better [to].. keep high standards..."

East Coast Scotland

Some of the participants admitted to not being tech savvy and found it hard to keep up in a fast-moving area like tech. There is a majority view that the UK Government should have a responsibility to protect consumers - particularly those who are vulnerable to cybercrime - when they are online which means holding companies and sellers to account through regulations around data privacy, security and online rights:

"I feel consumer rights in online trading platforms should be a major focus of new legislation. I am aware this is somewhat outside the remit of a trade deal, but I feel the trade of data between companies in different countries has implications for these problems."

East Coast Scotland

"If we open up, an even higher 'barrier' of scammers it is just going to wipe out this generation that want to get tech savvy or who want to use a computer, that

worries me that already now we have some serious issues. I don't want that to increase, as somebody who uses computers a lot."

East Coast Scotland

The USA was particularly characterised by Government policies being subject to influence by corporate lobbies, allowing them to be freer with consumer data and make it harder for consumers to hold them to account.

"If we're going to get into a trade agreement with the likes of America whose standards are even lower, I think there should be talks to improve that or at least get America to rise up to the occasion. Maybe step it up a bit and be at par with the UK. ...The UK is a little more stricter so maybe if we can get our partners to be at par with us, then we are not losing out on anything."

East Coast Scotland

"I don't want to have to increase to another 100 spam emails from America's Amazon. I don't want to open that up, but I feel like if we allow them to get the data now it could do a lot of damage to the UK and the generation who don't know how to secure their computers."

East Coast Scotland

There was some doubt as to whether companies can be trusted to do right by consumers when it comes to data security and data protection and so there was a view that there should be internationally agreed standards:

"Government authorities should be responsible for setting those standards and not companies [who] will always look out for themselves. So whatever standards they set for themselves will probably be mostly for their benefit more than to the consumer's benefit. If the government set what standards, organisations should follow, that will bring a little more sense of security for consumers."

East Coast Scotland

Recommendations

The public dialogue commissioned by Which?, co-designed with Hopkins Van Mil, revealed important conclusions for consideration by those negotiating UK trade deals. They include the need to respect fundamental issues such as consumer trust and not to undermine this with an over-simplification of the consumer view. Conclusions from the deliberative process are summarised in this section.

- The National Trade Conversation demonstrates that **the UK consumer is a complex individual with a range of perspectives. It is inadequate to assume a simplistic view of the consumer, who is entirely focused on choice and price.** Consumers are affected by every aspect of the trade deals under negotiation. Their priorities take into account choice and price, but in the context of how these choices affect the environment, health and safety, employment and fair trade.
- **Consumers need to trust that any products or services they buy have health and safety standards in place,** so that they don't have to take time and energy in scrutinising everything they buy.
- **The current regulatory framework is seen as part of the UK's reputation for quality products and services** and in line with our national characteristics of striving for high standards. Participants asked for the trade negotiations to build on this strong regulatory platform and for it to evolve over time as the UK makes new, tailor made, trade relationships.
- Participants want the **UK government to apply a long term view to its trade negotiations and avoid quickly negotiated trade deals which have short-term gains, but longer-term harms** for the health of the nation and the planet.
- **The environment was seen time and time again by participants as a fundamental plank of any trade deal.** Participants saw the strong link between trade and the environment and wanted UK trade deals to help deliver the UK's net zero 2050 climate change targets.
- With the UK now negotiating its own trade deals, **consumers expect government to involve them through clear communication about what could change and the evidence and expertise guiding our negotiating goals.**
- **Scottish consumers need reassurance that the UK government takes their interests and concerns into account through meaningful involvement.**

The NTC also provides important guidance in terms of the policy approach that the government should take, including the opportunities it should be promoting and red lines it should be drawing. Below are the recommendations Which? has for the terms of future trade deals.

Recommendations

- The government must ensure that there is no wriggle room in the trade deals that it is negotiating that would weaken the food standards consumers can expect. The government should instead take the opportunity to work with trading partners to improve consumer protections and standards – whether for safety, animal welfare or wider sustainability and based on the precautionary principle. It is positive that the Trade and Agriculture Commission will have a role in scrutinising deals – but it needs to have consumer interest representation to do this effectively.
- This approach is also needed for standards for consumer products more generally. Very different systems can exist in other countries for regulation of consumer products – as well as different systems for setting standards and ensuring compliance with them.
- The UK must ensure that trade deals uphold consumer protections and that any move to alignment or recognition of the other countries’ standards, or how compliance with our standards is assessed, will not undermine this.
- The government must ensure that provisions relating to digital trade and data flows within the trade deals it is negotiating uphold the protections that consumers can expect under the current GDPR regime.
- More generally, the UK should look to promote consumer rights in digital trade and enhance regulatory cooperation on cross-border trade with its trading partners. It should also ensure that its ability to enhance legislation on online harms, in line with the wider government agenda to place greater responsibilities

on online platforms for the safety and accuracy of their content, is not undermined by new trade deals.

- The UK should play a leading role in placing environmental considerations at the heart of the trade deals it is negotiating, including through a specific chapter that goes beyond the sustainable development chapter that has been included in EU trade deals the UK has been party to. Trade policy needs to be closely aligned with the UK's international, as well as domestic, commitments to tackle climate change as well as with sustainable production and consumption more generally.
- Nothing included within trade deals, including technical barriers to trade, should dilute the UK's existing standards or inhibit its ability to legislate or otherwise set standards to help reduce the environmental impact of goods or services or inform consumers about it.
- The government needs to ensure a transparent approach to trade negotiations that goes beyond the high level objectives that it has published to date and delivers tangible benefits for people, wherever they live in the UK – and as consumers as well as citizens.
- Advisory bodies set up to inform the government's approach need to be drawn from across the UK, but also from different interest groups, including consumer representatives. To date, this has only been achieved to a limited extent. The Strategic Trade Advisory Group (STAG) has representation from a broad range of interests. But the sector specific Trade Advisory Groups (TAGs) which advise the government on an on-going basis as the trade deal negotiation rounds take place currently only include business representatives.
- The government should build on the NTC ensuring that it engages more people in discussions about its priorities for trade policy and trade deals. This includes its immediate priorities as well as its wider ambitions, such as the CPTPP and longer-term, India, the Gulf and Latin America.

- The government should show its commitment to promoting consumer interests in trade deals by negotiating for a specific consumer chapter within trade deals. This would set out key guiding principles for promotion of consumer rights and protections, reinforcing provisions within specific chapters that have implications for consumers, including health protection, technical regulation, competition policy and sustainable development.

Appendix

External links

All outputs of the National Trade Conversation can be found [here](#). This includes the full research report, the appendices to the full report and the policy paper.

Our microsite on trade can be found [here](#), which sets out all of Which?'s work on trade and our response to new trade agreements.

Thank you!

Finally, we would like to thank all 18 participants in East Coast Scotland for their enthusiastic contributions to the National Trade Conversation.

