

# **Integrating Well-being and Growth: A Vision for a Post-Brexit Trade Strategy in the UK**

## **1. Introduction**

1.1 This position statement, produced by the TRADE-WELL Network, presents a vision for a UK trade strategy based on three principles: harm prevention, inclusive sustainability, and competent scrutiny. This approach not only promotes economic growth, but also addresses the pressing health and environmental concerns facing the nation in these challenging times.

1.2 TRADE-WELL, a cross-disciplinary group of researchers and policy stakeholders, seeks to broaden the scope of inquiry into the complex interplay between trade policies and health outcomes. Evolving from the foundational work of the PETRA Network, TRADE-WELL is committed to generating actionable insights to safeguard and promote health equity within the context of UK trade policy.

## **2. Background**

2.1 The UK faces several critical challenges in relation to health and economic growth. A surge in the prevalence of physical and mental ill-health among children and the working-age population has halted previous improvements in mortality and life expectancy and widened health inequalities between social groups, devolved nations, and regions. This situation, following on from 14 years of austerity, is being exacerbated by the ongoing cost of living crisis.

2.2 At the same time, extraordinarily high levels of health-related economic inactivity are further weakening already low prospects for economic growth.

2.3 International trade is, and has always been, a central engine of economic growth. Free trade policies are pursued for a variety of reasons including, for example, national security. They also wield significant influence over health and its social determinants, although this aspect is often overlooked.

2.4 The UK's post-Brexit landscape offers a unique opportunity to align international trade strategies with national economic interests and health priorities. However, there is currently no central organising vision for pursuing and negotiating free trade policies.

## **3. Free Trade and Health**

3.1 A primary objective of free trade agreements is the promise of economic growth. While economic gains in some areas are a positive outcome of trade deals, these agreements also require a nuanced understanding of their sector-specific economic consequences, which may include adverse effects for certain industries. This can mean some people experience economic insecurity and job loss, with knock-on effects on health. For example, the trade deals agreed with Australia and New Zealand have been criticised for their negative impact on UK farmers.

3.2 Free trade agreements also commit countries to certain regulatory and legal obligations. In some cases, this can make it more difficult to regulate for the benefits of health and can also increase industry influence in public health standard setting. There are also implications for the environment and climate change.

## 4. Principles for a Health-Conscious Trade Strategy

4.1 As the UK navigates its post-Brexit landscape, the need for a comprehensive trade strategy that integrates economic growth with health considerations is paramount. This necessitates a central organizing vision for trade negotiations, one that harmonizes economic aspirations with health imperatives. With this in mind, a group of interdisciplinary researchers from the TRADE-WELL Network met in London in November 2023. The aim of this meeting was to develop key principals that could usefully be incorporated into a post-Brexit trade strategy.

4.2 Three key principles for a health-conscious trade strategy were agreed:

4.2.1 **Harm Prevention:** This principle emphasizes the importance of assessing and mitigating impacts on current and future human and planetary health and advocating for a proactive, precautionary approach. This idea includes incorporating public health exceptions, mechanisms for review, adjustment funds, while also promoting high global standards in health and environmental practices.

4.2.2 **Inclusive sustainability:** Aligning with national and global sustainability and climate change objectives, such as the UN SDGs, to which the UK is a signatory, is essential. This includes exploring an 'economy of well-being approach', like the Welsh Government's Well-being of Future Generations Act approach, for broader UK adoption. The impacts of UK trade policy on health in developing economies should also be considered.

4.2.3 **Competent Scrutiny and Review Mechanisms:** Ensuring greater involvement from devolved nations/regions in trade discussions is key, as they are notably underrepresented in these critical conversations. Robust and transparent parliamentary scrutiny and the use of Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) for evidence-informed development is needed. This includes scrutinizing the impact on various population groups to ensure equitable outcomes.

## 5. Conclusion

5.1 As the UK charts a way forward in the post-Brexit era, the imperative for a trade strategy that harmoniously balances economic growth with the health and well-being of its citizens cannot be overstated. The principles outlined in this statement provide a blueprint for integrating health-conscious considerations into trade negotiations. By adhering to these principles, the UK can lead in demonstrating how trade can be a force for economic prosperity and public health enhancement, setting a global example for sustainable trade practices.