**Conservative Party Conference 2023: round-up**

Overview

The Conservative Party Conference was held in Manchester from 1 – 4 October in the Manchester Central Convention Complex. With support for the Conservatives dwindling in the polls and a general election looming, Rishi Sunak was eager to set apart his leadership from the 13 years of Conservative Government that preceded him.

Discussions around the fate of HS2 largely dominated conference. Amid mounting speculation that the Prime Minister was set to scrap the high-speed rail line, West Midlands Conservative Mayor, Andy Street made a heartfelt plea for Rishi Sunak to reconsider as he would be “cancelling the future”. In spite of Mr Street’s attempt, during his keynote address, his first as Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak announced that the Northern leg of HS2 from Birmingham to Manchester has been axed. The Prime Minister announced that the £36 billion budget from HS2 will be reinvested into Network North, an amalgamation of alternative transport projects covering rail and road networks.

The recurrent theme of the conference was Sunak’s “long term decisions for a brighter future” rhetoric, under which he laid out his headline policy announcements; the scrapping of HS2, school-leaver qualification reform and the commitment to end smoking in a generation by gradually increasing in the age at which cigarettes can legally be sold.

Key figures

* Rishi Sunak: Prime Minister
* Kemi Badenoch: Secretary of State for Business and Trade
* Thérèse Coffey: Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
* Steve Barclay: Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

Policy announcements

For the Conservative Government, conference serves as an opportunity to showcase their political agenda. Unlike the approach of both the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats, the Conservative conference is not primarily focused on policy development. However, ministerial speeches during conference did feature the introduction of several new policies:

**Business and trade**

* Tackle late payment of invoices and long payment terms supporting the small businesses.
* Broaden the powers of the Small Business Commissioner, enabling it to undertake investigations and publish reports where necessary on the basis of anonymous information and intelligence, and rename it to reflect its role.
* Strengthen the Prompt Payment Code so that business signatories must reaffirm their commitment every two years to stay on it.
* Extend the Reporting on Payment Practices and Performance Regulations.
* Promote the benefits of digital payment technologies.
* Launch a review of regulators to seek out post-Brexit regulatory advantages, uncovering what works well, what can be improved in regulators’ agility and performance, and how complexity and duplication can be reduced.

Most relevant to Trading Standards:

The review of regulators aims to change the regulatory landscape, and as such might have an impact on Trading Standards. As part of the review of regulators, the Government will be launching a 12-week call for evidence to hear from businesses, their advisers, regulators and consumers. CTSI will be coordinating a response to this consultation compiling the expertise of our members and our Lead Officer network.

**Education and skills**

* Introduce the Advanced British Standard, a Baccalaureate-style qualification for 16-19-year-olds, bringing together A Levels and T Levels into a new, single qualification.
* Expand the existing school-teacher recruitment and retention premium to all Further Education Colleges.
* Double payments for teachers in key subjects granting up to £30,000 tax-free over the first five years.
* Provide new funding to help students successfully re-sit English and Maths GCSEs.
* Adopt an evidence-based approach to maths, inspired by the success in transforming literacy outcomes with phonics.
* Introduce Minimum Service Levels in Higher Education to curtail strikes.

Most relevant for Trading Standards

The introduction of the Advanced British Standard (ABS) could have some impact on apprenticeships, depending on the specific areas it covers. Implementing ABS qualifications will take a significantly long time and we will have to see how it develops to assess any impact on apprenticeships.

**Health and social care**

* Incrementally raising the age of sale by one year each year for this generation (born on or after 1 January 2009) to prevent them and future generations from ever taking up smoking in the first place.
* Consult on restricting the availability and appeal of vapes, including restricting flavours, disposability, packaging and point-of-sale displays.
* Provide £30 million per year and new powers to fine rogue retailers who sell tobacco and vapes illegally and introduce enhanced age verification online.
* Establish three new NHS medical schools to boost the number of NHS doctors with over 200 extra undergraduate places from 2024.
* Medical school places to double to 15,000 by 2031 via the Long-term Workforce Plan.

Most relevant to Trading Standards:

The introduction of the gradual increase in the age of sale for cigarettes will be a challenge for businesses to implement and more complicated for enforcement. However, the government is committing significant funding to support the enforcement work of Trading Standards as well as Border Force and HMRC.

CTSI will be using the expertise of our members and Lead Officers to coordinate a response to the consultation on restricting the availability and appeal of vapes, including restricting flavours, disposability, packaging and point of-sale-displays.