

WTO Joint Initiative on E-Commerce: UK Statement



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Chair,

Thank you for putting on this meeting today. Greetings to you, to those on the line in Geneva, and to those joining from around the world.

As we move towards the end of what has been – by any standards – a tumultuous year, the UK would like first of all to thank the co-convenors for their sustained leadership in driving forward this important Initiative.

Yesterday, the UK submitted its own written text proposals setting out our preferred position on a number of the key topics under discussion in this Initiative. Our text proposals cover: customs duties on electronic transmissions, personal information protection, cross-border transfer of information, location of computing (and financial computing) services, source code, cryptography, open internet access, cybersecurity, electronic contracts, and paperless trading.

The UK has participated actively in small group discussions and strongly supports the co-convenors' small group principles which were set out during the Plenary session on 23 October. To encourage members to capitalise on existing momentum within a number of the small groups, the UK has chosen not to propose new text on commitments relating to electronic authentication and electronic signatures, open government data, online consumer protection or unsolicited commercial electronic messages. Negotiations on these provisions are already at an advanced stage and the UK can support a number of the existing streamlined text proposals. We will continue to participate in those small group discussions in support of our preferred outcomes. The United Kingdom has also not tabled text in relation to telecommunications services, but we remain supportive of this topic being included

in the outcome of these discussions and will seek to engage with other members on this issue going forward.

We welcome the co-convenors' efforts to settle the content of the substantive articles of this agreement so that we can work towards a consolidated text by the end of the year. As we have noted previously, the UK is committed to supporting the participation of developing and least-developed countries in these negotiations and we welcome the discussion on this issue today.

As this Initiative continues to mature, other topics are likely to form the basis of small group discussions. I would encourage the co-convenors to consider whether it is now time to create a small group on data.

The free flow of data is an essential component of cross-border trade, and this is even more important in the context of Covid-19. The pandemic has increased reliance on electronic communications and other virtual interactions. This has resulted in sharp increases in international data flows and this trend is unlikely to be fully reversed post-Covid19.

The flow of information sits at the heart of this Initiative – but, for many members, it is also one of the most sensitive parts of the negotiation. There are strongly held views on all sides. And, perhaps because of this, discussions around cross-border data flows, privacy, and data localisation have so far been sporadic and have resulted in little tangible progress.

The UK hopes to address this dissonance and work with members to agree rules on data that benefit us all. Progress will need to be made in these areas if we are to realise our shared objective of agreeing rules that unlock the extraordinary economic potential that a truly global digital economy promises.

We should not be afraid to challenge each other's views constructively, revisit our own assumptions, and work together in good faith to find dynamic, inclusive solutions that work for both developed and developing countries. Together, we can – and we must – find a way through.

I have said before that this Initiative is about more than e-commerce. It goes to the credibility of the WTO itself, and its ability to deliver relevant global trade rules fit for the twenty-first century.

The United Kingdom is committed to working actively with the co-convenors and all members to ensure that this Initiative reaches a successful and timely conclusion.

Thank you, Chair.

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