

Statistical bulletin

International trade in UK nations, regions and cities: 2021

Experimental estimated value of exports and imports of goods and services for 2021 for International Territory Levels 1, 2 and 3, and city regions. Includes EU and non-EU split along with data for top 20 partner countries.

Contact:
Helen Tuck
subnational.trade@ons.gov.uk
+44 1633 456221

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1 . Main points

- In 2021, there was a total trade surplus in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, driven in each nation by the trade surplus in services.
- London's trade surplus of £51.6 billion, offset the trade deficits in other English regions.
- The value of goods imported by the South East was higher than any UK region (£93.1 billion) in 2021, 57.5% of which were by the wholesale and motor trade industry.
- In 2021, London, East of England, the North West and Scotland all saw total exports return to pre-coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic levels (2018).
- Total imports in 2021 remained below pre-pandemic levels (2018) in all nations and regions within the UK, with imports in the travel industry particularly affected by coronavirus restrictions.

For comparisons, the year 2018 is used as the latest stable year in which trade was unaffected by [stockpiling in the lead up to the UK leaving the EU](#) and trade disruption caused by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

2 . Data collection changes affecting trade statistics

Data within this bulletin are in current prices, therefore have not been adjusted to remove the effects of inflation. The impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic caused volatility in trade statistics from 2020. As such, it is difficult to assess the extent to which trade movements reflect short-term trade disruption, or longer-term supply chain adjustments.

EU imports and exports

HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) implemented a data collection change, covered in their [Methodology changes to trade in goods statistics from March 2022](#). This affected data on goods exports from Great Britain (GB) to the EU in January 2021, and data on goods imports from the EU to GB in January 2022. We have applied adjustments to our estimates of goods imports from the EU for 2021, found in our [Trade in goods: Adjustments to 2021 EU imports estimates, by chapter dataset](#). This was to reflect the data collection change, which brought imports and exports statistics onto a like-for-like basis in 2021.

The full time series for goods imports from and exports to the EU contains a discontinuity from January 2021, resulting from the move from Intrastat to customs declarations, as detailed in our [Impact of trade in goods data collection changes on UK trade statistics: adjustments to 2021 EU imports estimates article](#). We are continuing to work with HMRC to consider possible options to account for this discontinuity.

Staged customs controls

In 2021, the use of Staged Customs Controls (SCC) allowed customs declarations to be reported up to 175 days after the date of import for imports of non-controlled goods from the EU to GB. Temporary arrangements still apply for imports of goods from Ireland to GB.

To help understand the possible effect of SCC on trade in goods data for imports from the EU, we published our [Impact of trade in goods data collection changes on UK trade statistics: update on Staged Customs Controls article](#) on 17 February 2023. We will publish our [Impact of trade in goods data collection changes on UK trade statistics: further update on Staged Customs Controls article](#) on 3 July 2023.

3 . Subnational trade analysis

International trade in UK nations and regions, in 2021

In 2021, all UK nations had a total trade surplus driven by trade in services. Of the English regions, London, the North East and the South West also had a trade surplus. London had the highest total trade surplus at £51.6 billion, driven by service exports in financial and insurance activities and information and communication industries, which exported £53.7 billion and £42.6 billion, respectively.

The South East had the largest trade deficit, driven by imports of goods at £93.1 billion, with the manufacturing industry accounting for £53.5 billion (57.5%) of this.

Table 1: All four UK nations had a total trade surplus in 2021

Trade in goods, trade in services and total trade split by International Territorial Level (ITL) 1 region, 2021

£ billion

Region	Trade in goods - imports	Trade in goods - exports	Trade in services - imports	Trade in services - exports	Total trade - imports	Total trade - exports	Total trade - balance
North East	12.0	13.4	3.2	5.3	15.2	18.6	3.4
North West	41.4	32.5	16.4	24.5	57.8	56.9	-0.9
Yorkshire and The Humber	28.5	17.1	7.6	12.2	36.1	29.3	-6.9
East Midlands	31.0	22.3	5.8	7.9	36.8	30.2	-6.6
West Midlands	35.8	26.6	8.4	13.9	44.2	40.5	-3.7
East of England	42.2	28.6	15.9	22.4	58.1	51.1	-7.0
London	62.6	37.8	75.9	152.2	138.5	190.0	51.6
South East	93.1	42.5	24.6	45.2	117.6	87.6	-30.0
South West	23.0	21.9	8.5	13.0	31.5	34.9	3.4
England	369.6	242.6	166.2	296.6	535.9	539.2	3.4
Wales	15.4	17.0	3.8	6.8	19.2	23.8	4.6
Scotland	17.8	26.9	11.4	23.2	29.2	50.1	20.9
Northern Ireland	9.4	9.2	1.6	4.1	11.0	13.2	2.3
Unknown	62.6	18.4	6.5	0.0	69.1	18.4	-50.8
Extra-regio	17.8	9.3	0.0	0.0	17.8	9.3	-8.5
UK	492.6	323.3	189.6	330.7	682.2	654.0	-28.1

Source: International trade in UK nations, regions and cities: 2021 from the Office for National Statistics

Notes

1. Unknown region includes unmatched companies, trade in precious metals, national imports of gambling services and businesses who act within the UK on behalf of foreign companies overseas.
2. Extra-regio includes parts of the national economic territory which cannot be attached directly to a single region including some offshore oil transactions and territorial enclaves.
3. Trade in goods plus trade in services may not sum exactly to total trade because of rounding.

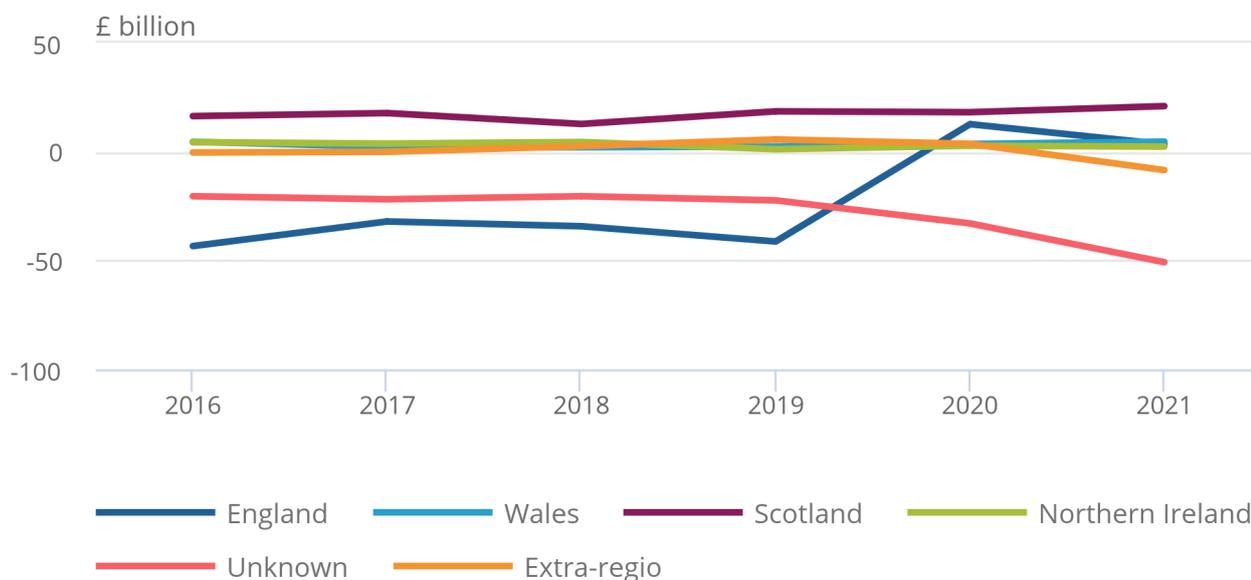
International trade in UK nations and regions over time

Figure 1: From 2016 to 2021, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland all had a trade surplus

Total trade balance split by International Territorial Level (ITL) 1 region, 2021

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Source: International trade in UK nations, regions and cities: 2021 from the Office for National Statistics

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1. Unknown region includes unmatched companies, trade in precious metals, national imports of gambling services and businesses who act within the UK on behalf of foreign companies overseas.
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England had a trade deficit until the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, where in 2020 it moved into a trade surplus. This was driven by a £31.0 billion (20.2%) fall in total imports to London from 2019 into 2020, while exports from London fell by a lesser £7.7 billion (4.3%).

Of all regions, London contributed the highest percentage of the UK's exports in all years from 2016 to 2021, followed by the South East. Services accounted for 80.1% of London's total exports in 2021, while in the South East services accounted for 51.5% of total exports.

From 2020 to 2021, all nations and regions saw an increase in exports and imports, as measures introduced globally to slow the transmission of coronavirus began to be lifted. The only exception was in the East Midlands, where exports fell slightly by £0.5 billion (1.6%).

We compare 2021 with the year 2018, as the latest stable year for UK international trade because 2020 was an atypical year.

Figure 2: Total exports in London, East of England, the North West and Scotland have returned to pre-pandemic levels

Total trade exports by International Territorial Level (ITL) 1 region, UK, 2018 to 2021

Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

London had the greatest increase in total exports from 2018 to 2021, driven by an increase in services exports, which increased by £19.8 billion (15.0%). The increase of total exports in Scotland was driven by a £2.2 billion (8.9%) increase in the export of goods, with goods exports to the Netherlands accounting for £1.7 billion of this increase.

In the East of England, goods exports in the manufacturing industry were £3.4 billion (23.8%) higher in 2021 than in 2018. Additionally, services exports in the real estate activities, professional, scientific and technical activities industry were up £2.6 billion (62.7%). This region is the location of research institutions in the fields of medicine, pharmaceuticals and biosciences, which may have boosted exports in this region as a response to the pandemic.

In the North West, total exports were £4.4 billion (8.3%) higher in 2021 compared with 2018, driven by a £3.3 billion (11.3%) increase in goods exports. The manufacturing industry accounted for 72.0% of goods exports in 2021, representing the car and machinery manufacturing hubs situated in the North West.

The largest fall was in the South East, where exports fell by £10.9 billion (11.0%), driven by a £8.9 billion (39.0%) drop in the export of goods in the wholesale and motor trades industry. This may have been affected by the global shortage of semiconductors, as detailed by the [World Economic Forum](#). The largest percentage fall in total exports over this period was in Northern Ireland at 30.6%.

The West Midlands saw the second largest fall in total exports at £8.5 billion (17.4%), driven by a £6.1 billion (22.6%) decrease in goods exports in the manufacturing industry.

Figure 3: Total imports in 2021 were lower than in 2018 for all nations and regions within the UK

Total trade imports by International Territorial Level (ITL) 1 region, UK, 2018 to 2021

Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

As with total exports, the South East of England and the West Midlands saw the greatest fall in total imports, which fell by £11.3 billion (8.8%) and £8.6 billion (16.2%), respectively.

The travel industry was particularly affected, with all nations and regions seeing at least a £1.4 billion decrease in travel imports. The number of flights leaving the UK in 2021 are still below pre-pandemic levels, as found in our [Daily UK flights dataset](#). Restrictions varied across regions until May 2021, and the largest percentage falls in travel imports were seen in Northern Ireland, Wales and the South West.

The largest percentage decrease in total imports was seen in Wales, which fell 27.0%, driven by travel imports, and a £3.3 billion fall in the import of goods in the manufacturing industry. Imports to Wales from non-EU countries fell by £5.0 billion, compared with £2.1 billion from EU countries. Wales was the only International Territorial Level (ITL) 1 region to see a larger fall in imports from non-EU countries than EU countries.

4 . Explore UK international trade by International Territorial Levels (ITL) for by 2021

Explore the 2021 trade data using our interactive tool. Our data break down UK trade by International Territorial Levels (ITL) 1, 2 and 3. Select a certain region by using the drop-down menu or hovering over it.

5 . International trade in services and goods by subnational areas of the UK data

[Subnational trade timeseries](#) Dataset | Released 28 June 2023 Experimental estimated value of exports and imports from 2016 to 2021 for total trade, trade in goods and trade in services for International Territorial Levels (ITLs) 1, 2 and 3. Includes EU and non-EU split along with data for top 20 partner countries.

[Subnational trade in goods](#) Dataset | Released 28 June 2023 Experimental estimated value of exports, imports and balance of goods for 2021 for International Territorial Levels (ITLs) 1, 2 and 3, and city regions. Includes EU and non-EU split along with data for top 20 partner countries.

[Subnational trade in services](#) Dataset | Released 28 June 2023 Experimental estimated value of exports, imports and balance of services for 2021 for International Territorial Levels (ITLs) 1, 2 and 3, and city regions. Includes EU and non-EU split along with data for top 20 partner countries.

6 . Glossary

ITL

The International Territorial Levels (ITL) is a hierarchical classification of administrative areas used for statistical purposes. ITL1 are major socio-economic regions, while ITL2 and ITL3 are progressively smaller regions. In the context of the UK, the ITL1 areas are Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the nine regions of England.

Total trade

The value of total trade between two trading partners (that is, exports plus imports).

Trade balance

The trade balance is the difference between exports and imports or exports minus imports. When the value of exports is greater than the value of imports, the trade balance is in surplus. When the value of imports is greater than the value of exports, the trade balance is in deficit. The balance is sometimes referred to as "net exports".

A full [Glossary of economic terms](#) is available.

7 . Strengths and limitations

This bulletin presents estimates of the value of imports and exports of goods and services and total trade from 2016 to 2021 to and from subnational areas of the UK. All figures presented are experimental, derived from a methodology that is subject to change based on feedback and that should be used with caution.

The impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has caused higher levels of volatility in trade statistics from 2020. As such, it is difficult to assess the extent to which trade movements reflect short-term trade disruption or longer-term supply chain adjustments.

As part of the [UK trade development plan](#), the trade in goods data now includes partner country estimates for trade in goods and the splitting out of the Extra-region region, which was previously included within Unknown. For trade in services in Northern Ireland, International Territorial Level (ITL) 3 and partner country estimates are now available for the first time.

The Unknown region includes unmatched companies, government spending in trade in goods, and imports of gambling by households in trade in services. Precious metals (which are high-value, low-volume products) are allocated to the Unknown region as they can skew figures in regions such as London.

Extra-region is made up of parts of the national economic territory which cannot be attached directly to a single region, including some offshore oil transactions.

Travel Estimates

The International Passenger Survey (IPS) was suspended from 16 March 2020 to 18 January 2021 because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

We have worked with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Data Science Campus to create estimates for travel using alternative data sources for the 2020 reference year. The data sources that have been used include the Civil Aviation Authority, Eurotunnel, the Consumer Prices Index including owner occupiers' housing costs (CPIH), airline stock figures and aggregated and anonymised foreign-issued card spend processed through Barclays point-of-sale (POS) and "card-not present" channels.

Gambling

The import of gambling services by UK households have not currently been allocated to a specific region. These are currently included in the Unknown region for trade in services at the ITL1 and worldwide level only.

More information about the methodology and the strengths and limitations of our datasets can be found in our [International trade in UK nations, regions and cities Quality and Methodology Information \(QMI\)](#).

8 . Revisions

This article contains revised estimates for 2019 and 2020, along with our first subnational estimates for 2021. We have also, for the first time, been able to provide a backseries to 2016, which is based on the latest methodology.

These estimates are consistent with the [UK National Accounts, The Blue Book: 2022](#). Previous publications on international trade in UK nations, regions and cities are based on old methodologies and as such should not be used to compare against this dataset.

9 . Related links

[International trade in UK nations, regions and cities QMI](#) Dataset | Last revised 28 June 2023 Quality and Methodology Information (QMI) report for our Subnational trade estimates release, detailing the strengths and limitations of the data, methods used, and data uses and users.

[International trade in UK nations, regions and cities: 2020](#) Article | Released 5 July 2022 Experimental estimated value of exports and imports of goods and services for 2020 for International Territory Levels 1, 2 and 3, and city regions. Includes EU and non-EU split.

[International trade in UK nations and regions: the impact of coronavirus \(COVID-19\): 2020](#) Article | Released 20 October 2022 An analysis looking at impacts of coronavirus pandemic on subnational trade in goods and services in 2020.

[HM Revenue and Customs \(HMRC\) Regional Trade Statistics](#) Web page | Released 11 June 2020 Breakdown of the flows of imports and exports between regions of the UK and other countries.

[UK trade in goods by industry, country and commodity, exports](#) Dataset | Released on 15 May 2023 Experimental dataset providing a breakdown of UK trade in goods by industry, country and commodity on a balance of payments basis. Data are subject to disclosure control, which means some data have been suppressed to protect confidentiality of individual traders.

[UK trade in goods by industry, country and commodity, imports](#) Dataset | Released on 15 May 2023 Experimental dataset providing a breakdown of UK trade in goods by industry, country and commodity on a balance of payments basis. Data are subject to disclosure control, which means some data have been suppressed to protect confidentiality of individual traders.

10 . Cite this bulletin

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