

The State of the Border

Business Experience
of the UK Border 2023

01/03/24



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Executive Summary



Executive Summary

Introduction

Businesses are adapting to the new UK border, but its operation continues to hamper UK trade.

Our findings show that businesses have adjusted extensively since 2021. But they continue to find the operation of the border frustrating and expensive.

At the same time, the Government has avoided significant disruption during the upheavals of the last few years. But it can hardly be satisfied with a border that left imports from the EU uncontrolled and still lacks the capacity to handle planned checks.

As the UK prepares for an election and change of administration, the current mission to create the 'best border in the world' remains incomplete. The Conservatives and Labour do not appear to be in dispute about the merit of – or even approach to – this ambition.

However, achieving it requires renewed political attention beyond the coming election, particularly to relations between government, ports, agents and trading businesses.

What we did

This report assesses businesses' experience of the border to inform business leaders, officials and wider public debate about how it performed, its impact on international trade and UK growth.

300

We surveyed 300 businesses about their experience, assessed the most recent trade statistics and interviewed 9 decision makers in depth about their experience of trade with the UK.



What we found

- Delivery time expectations have grown each year since 2021 for all goods. Businesses have added 10 days to their maximum estimated delivery time across all UK international supply chains.
- Nevertheless, overall experience has improved since 2021: 54% experienced delays, against 58% in 2022 and 83% in 2021. But this is because...
- Traders are adapting: half have increased delivery times (down from 59% in 2022 and 70% in 2021), 39% hired staff and purchased software, 44% increased inventory.
- Traders are growing more confident in themselves: 60% described are very confident in trading with the EU, versus 53% in 2021.
- Traders are more confident in advice from UK government sources: 48% expressed confidence in 2023 versus 40% in 2021. Logistics providers remain the most trusted at 60%.
- However, there is little evidence the border itself is improving: the same number cited the UK border as the reason for longer delivery times in 2023 as in 2021 (41%).

“We have experienced partners [now] and have long-term manufacturers in Europe... it feels like it is a ‘copy and paste’ process now.”

Chief Operating Officer, Commercial cycle business



Trader experience at the border



2023
54% 2022
58% 2021
83%

of importers experienced delays at the UK border. 58% of UK importers experienced similar delays in 2022.



2023
22% 2022
26% 2021
33%

of importers experienced goods being rejected or impounded at the UK border.

Trader strategies



2023
44% 2022
49% 2021
57%

of traders had increased inventory, especially those trading with the EU.



2023
50% 2022
59% 2021
70%

of traders have increased expected delivery times for their global supply chains.

Trader confidence



2023
60% 2022
57% 2021
53%

of traders described themselves as confident or very confident in importing and exporting from the EU. 37% said they become more or much more confident in 2023.



2023
48% 2022
42% 2021
40%

of traders described themselves as confident or very confident in advice received from HMRC or UK government sources. 60% expressed the same confidence in logistics providers.

Perceived causes of delays



2023
41% 2022
47% 2021
41%

of traders linked extended delivery time expectations to difficulties moving goods across the UK border. 34% cited delays in other customs systems.



2023
24% 2022
29% 2021
39%

of traders cited shortages of UK HGV drivers as a cause in delivery times extensions. This is a fall from 2022.

Trade patterns between the EU and UK ports settled down in 2023, after notable changes in 2021 and 2022. In particular new patterns look bedded in for:

- Dover, whose volumes declined further in 2023, continuing a post-Brexit trend. However, Dover remains by far the largest UK roll-on-roll-off port.
- Grimsby, which maintained and grew its share of roll-on-roll-off traffic since 2021, likely to be a result of EU trade seeking alternatives to the Channel.
- Irish 'landbridge' traffic which is notably down since the UK's departure from the EU, also reflected in Dover and Holyhead statistics
- Trade in food, which faces particular challenges in 2024: UK food exports, which face full EU SPS¹ controls, remain at 2018 levels. UK food imports have grown since Brexit but will face equivalent checks for the first time in 2024.

“When trucks and drivers wait at the border for hours or even overnight, the costs incurred are significant.”

Customs Implementation,
Customs Brokerage Service

Changes to UK import controls

New UK import controls will significantly impact the extensive trade in food, plant and animal products that occurs between the EU and the UK. There will be some, but lesser, effects for non-EU trade. We found that:

“We are told different things about the same product – how are we supposed to know what to do, when DEFRA don't know what we should be doing?”

Purchasing Manager,
Pet industry wholesaler

- Businesses are largely aware of the changes: 64% know about the change
- Businesses are broadly positive (39%) or neutral (34%) about the changes
- EU and non-EU traders take the same view
- 20% of importers already experience delays moving perishable products at the UK border
- Comparing import and export statistics suggests challenges ahead: UK food exports to the EU have stagnated since being subject to EU import controls.

¹ SPS – Sanitary and phytosanitary controls, which cover food, animal and plant products.



Recommendations

Achieving the 'best border in the world' is a laudable mission. It is also achievable. But the reality today is some way short of that ambition. Correcting this will require three things: greater political impetus to galvanise activity across multiple departments; greater partnership with ports, agents and border service providers; and, a far greater embrace of automation and technology, without which the UK's trade ambitions are doomed to fail. For an economy so dependent on trade, especially short supply lines with the European continent, UK border modernisation should be a much greater political priority.

A new government must:

- Provide new political impetus to drive modernisation and achieve the 'best border in the world'
- Prioritise partnership with infrastructure providers, like ports and inland facilities, to achieve the capacity and efficiency required
- Focus on opportunities for technical improvements under the TCA² review due in 2025, particularly for SPS goods
- Create conditions for greater investment by ports, local authorities and border service providers
- Exploit potential for technology and automated processing.

For businesses:

- Investment in technology and staff skills is vital. A customs border is now part of every international supply chain
- Training and technology reduce the risks of trade: successful businesses have invested in both in response to border disruption
- Assess your supply chain: around half of importers experiencing delays cite problems with partners' paperwork; over a third of exporters cite the same
- Optimise processes: most costs associated with the border appear in upstream business operations; reviewing options can reveal significant improvements to efficiency and effectiveness.

² TCA – The EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement, signed 30 December 2020

Businesses' Experience



Businesses' Experience

Border disruption continues to feature in our respondents' experience of international trade (Figure 1). The majority still experience delays and increased costs, as they have done each year since our first report in 2021. Time taken for checks remains the most widely cited reason for delays.

Businesses continue to bear the costs and risk of adapting to the post-Brexit UK border, though the overall process appears to be stabilising. Delays, disruption and cost increased in 2023, but at a slowing rate. Correspondingly, businesses feel more confident. They are investing in staff and software and express increasing confidence in their ability to manage the border.

“Our containers occasionally face inspections at UK borders... due to backlogs, this can sometimes extend the [delivery] up to 10 to 12 days.”

Supply Chain Executive, Spices import and export



Figure 1

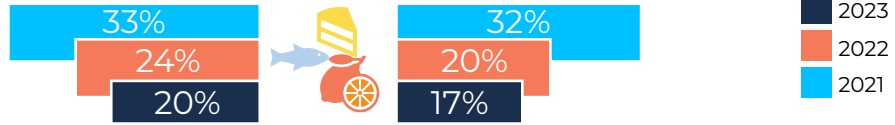
Experience of importing and exporting

IMPORTERS

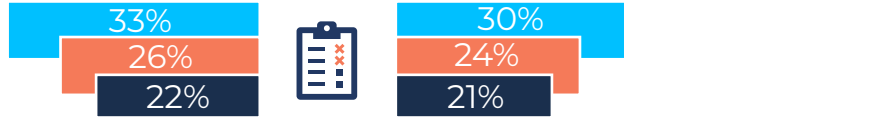
EXPORTERS

Have you experienced? (%)

Perishable goods held up at the border



Goods being rejected or impounded at the border



Changing your usual port of entry/exit



Unfulfilled orders



Delays at the UK border

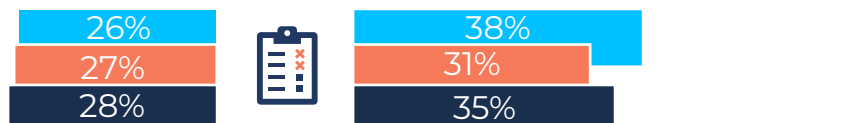


Increased fees



If you experienced delays, what caused them? (%)

Problems with paperwork from your firm



Lack of border capacity



Problems with paperwork from suppliers/customers outside the UK



Time taken for checks on goods



“Our biggest challenges are cash flow and education of businesses and personnel on the border procedures, reporting, etc..”

Logistics Manager, Automotive parts manufacturer

Responses to border challenges

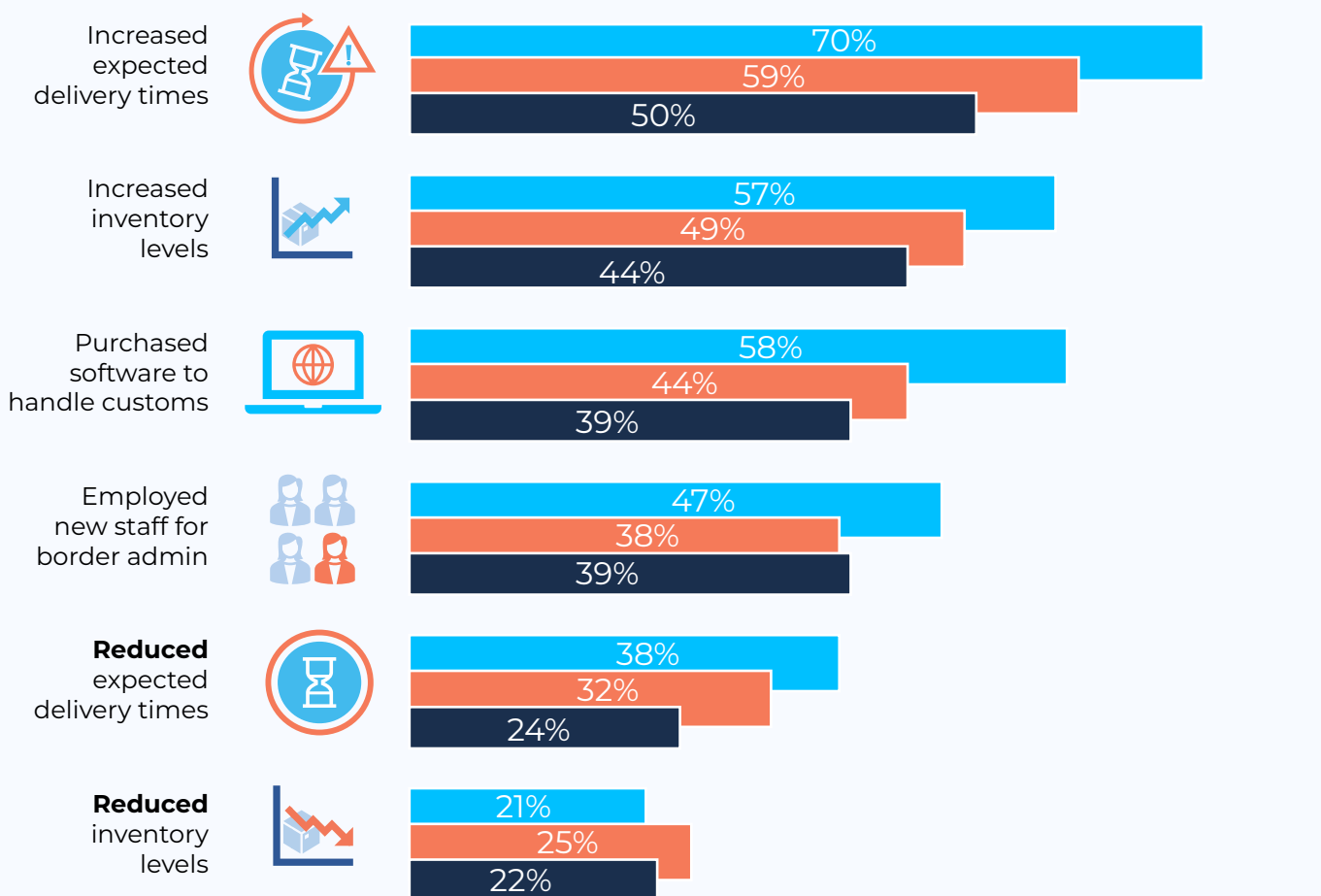
Most businesses increased their expected delivery times in response to supply chain challenges. 50% of respondents did so in 2023, albeit down from 70% in 2021 and 59% in 2022 (Figure 2). Border related factors are the most cited reason for this.

Investment in inventory, software and staff also increased in 2023, as they have in previous years. However, the reasons given by respondents vary. Inventory, for example, appears to be more closely associated with demand factors such as rising prices or anticipated increases in demand. See Figure 4.

Figure 2

% of respondents saying they have...

2021 2022 2023





Delivery times

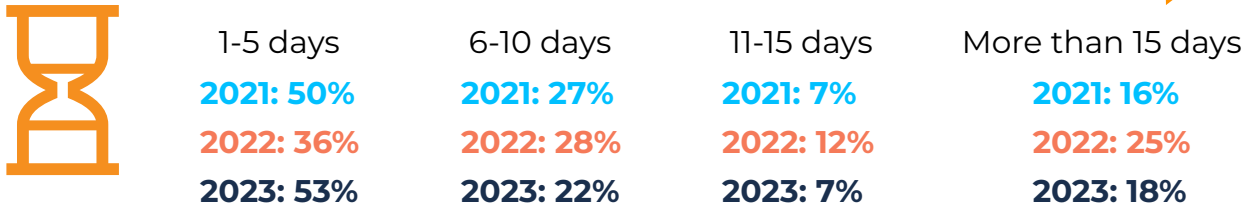
Expected delivery times continue to extend (Figure 3). However estimated average delivery times have reverted to overall 2021 levels, after a notable rise in 2022. This suggests business expectations are lagging behind their actual experience: they still expect prolonged delivery times, even if their estimate of average delivery times has reduced.

Their most commonly cited reason for this uncertainty is difficulty with goods entering/leaving the UK and other countries. This is cited consistently through 2021, 2022 and 2023. Immediate Brexit- and pandemic-related effects, like driver shortages and container shortages are much less commonly cited than in 2021.

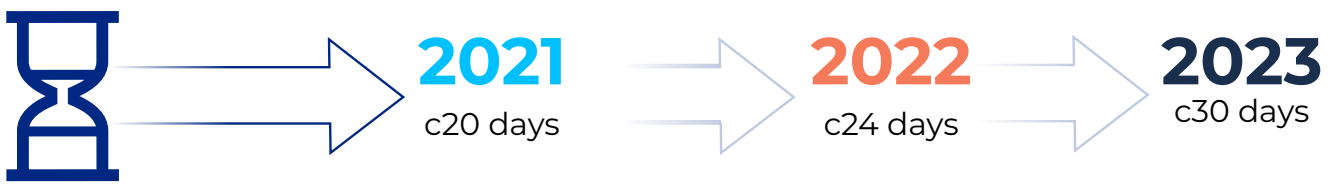
Figure 3

Estimated delivery times (all goods)

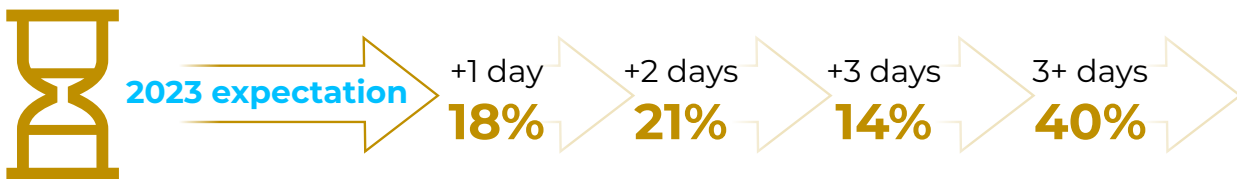
Estimated AVERAGE delivery times (all goods)



Estimated MAXIMUM delivery times (all goods)



Change EXPECTED delivery times 2023



Nominated causes for extended delivery times	2021	2022	2023
Difficulties with goods entering or leaving the UK	41%	47%	41%
Difficulties with goods entering or leaving other countries	35%	41%	34%
Delays passed on from suppliers	42%	38%	38%
Shortages of HGV drivers or logistics workers in the UK	39%	29%	21%
Shortages of shipping and containers	37%	21%	24%

Inventory strategies

Inventory also continued to increase, with 44% of respondents saying stocks increased in 2023 (Figure 4). However general concern about supply chains and inflation were the most cited reasons. 'Difficulties with the UK border' slipped significantly and was cited by only 19% of respondents (against 41% in 2021 and 26% in 2022).

'Preparing for expected increases in demand' has consistently increased in popularity as a reason for increased stock, from 30% of respondents in 2021 to 38% in 2023. Notably, 'my business has just grown' jumped from 23% to 31%.

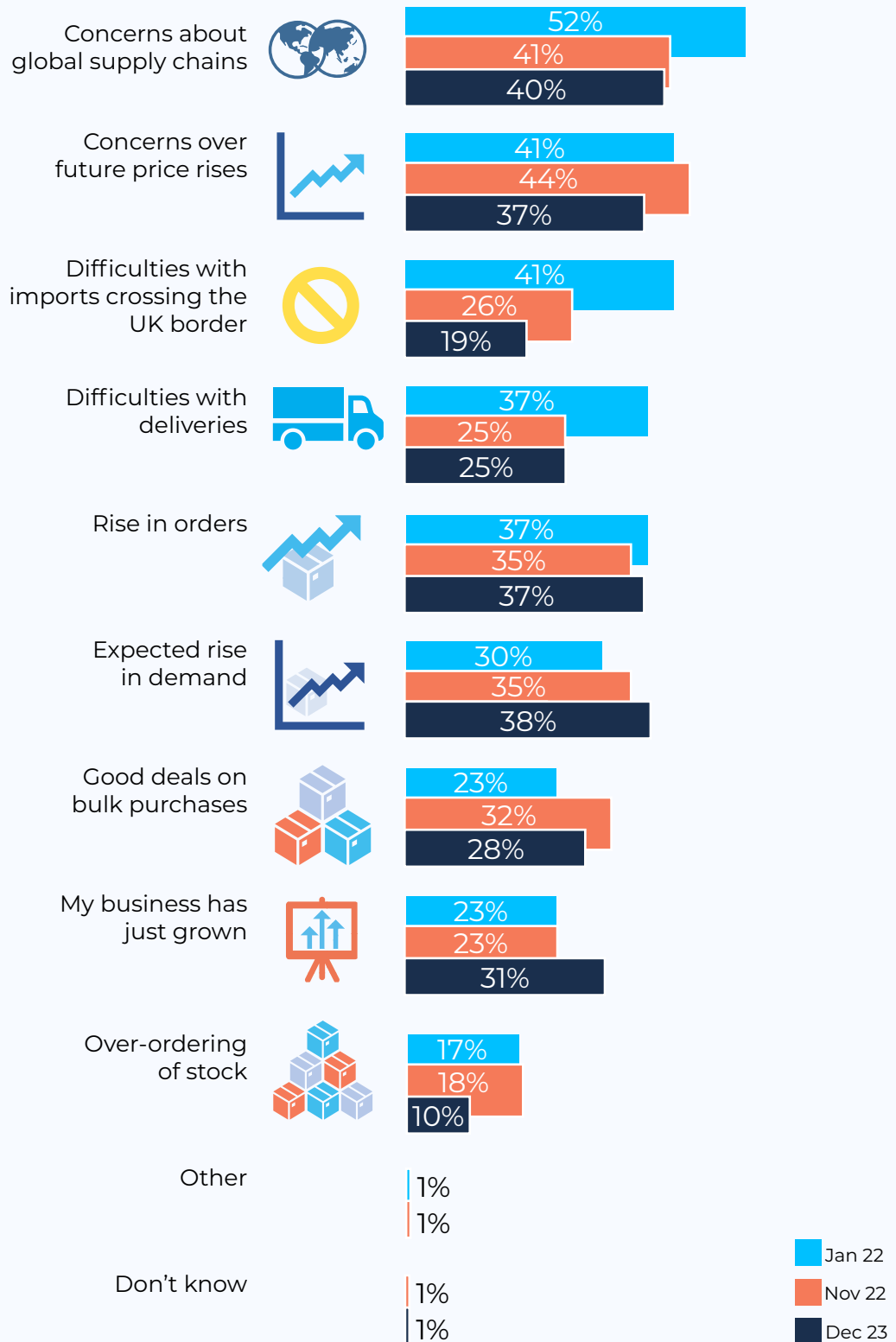
Concerns about supply chains and inflation remain the primary reasons for increasing stock.



Figure 4

Reason for stock increases

% of respondents who said they increased stock selecting each explanation



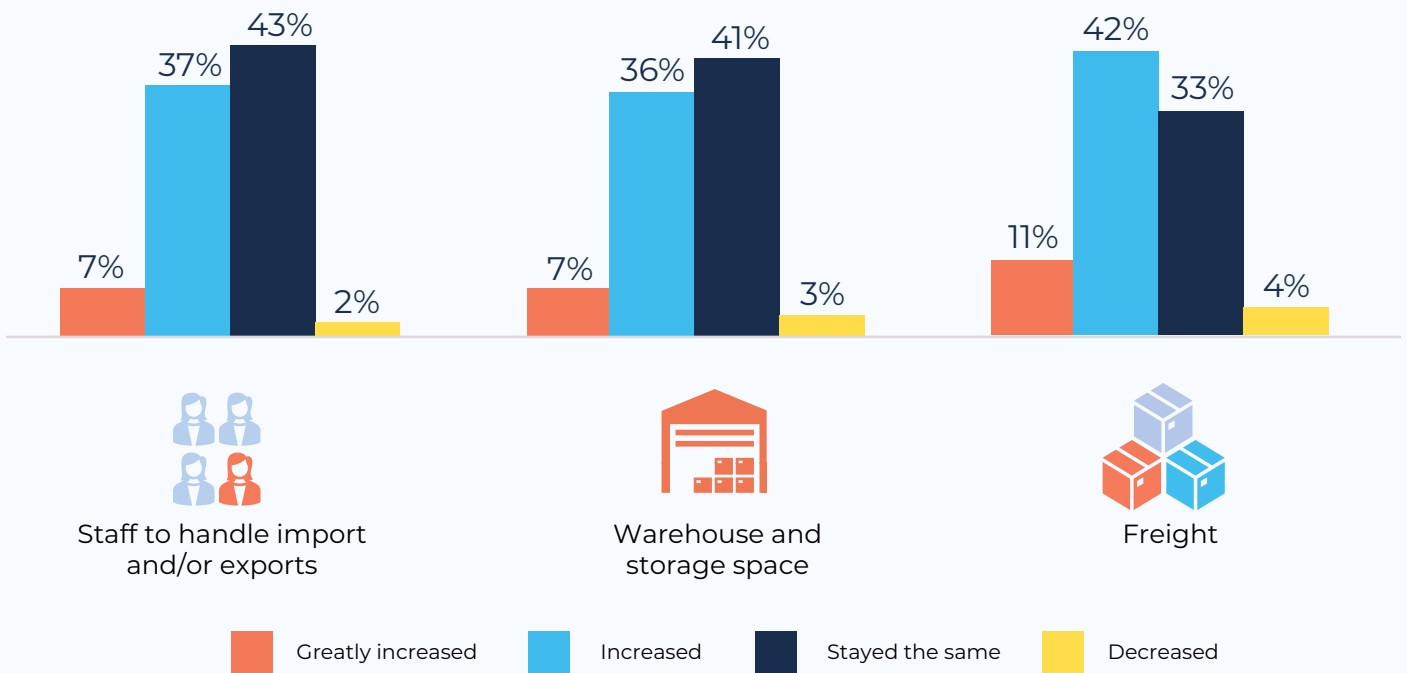
Costs

Rising costs remain a concern for respondents to our survey. However, there is some evidence these pressures are easing. The proportion of respondents saying costs had 'stayed about the same' rose across all categories compared to 2022. In no category does the proportion saying costs have 'increased' or 'greatly increased' exceed the proportions from 2022.

In most cases, respondents blame general inflationary pressures for cost increases, though 40% still cite customs issues at the border (Figure 5). There is little evidence of costs actually decreasing.

Figure 5

Respondents reporting change in costs in 2023



Nominated causes for rising freight costs 2023

69% General inflationary pressure

40% Instability in global supply chains

47% Customs issues at the border

25% Importing/exporting more

“Our containers have been stopped and destroyed at the border. We don’t import cuttlefish any more for fear of it being destroyed. We had to pay £10k for holding items at Port Health for 2 months.”

Purchasing Manager, Pet industry wholesaler

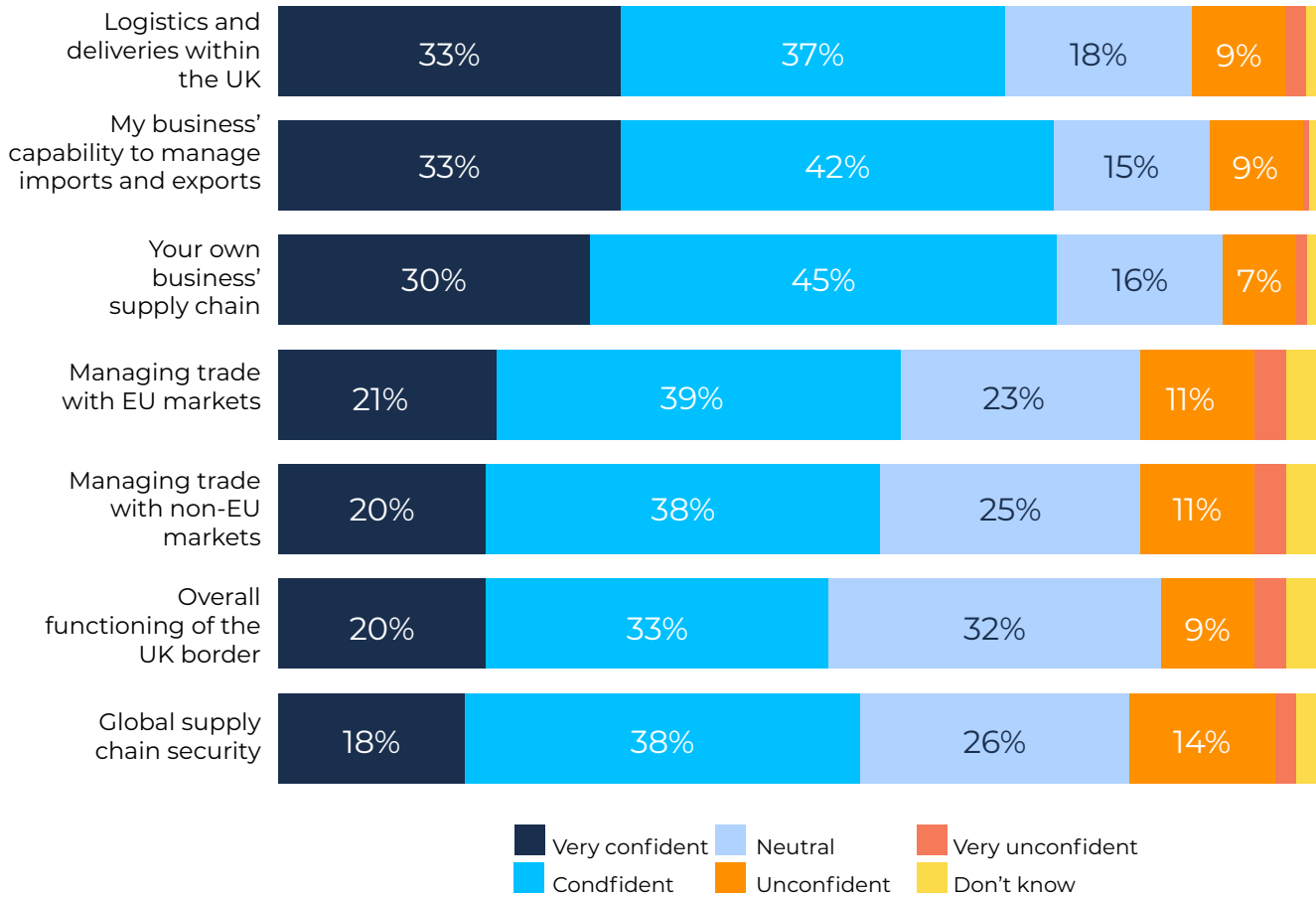


Confidence

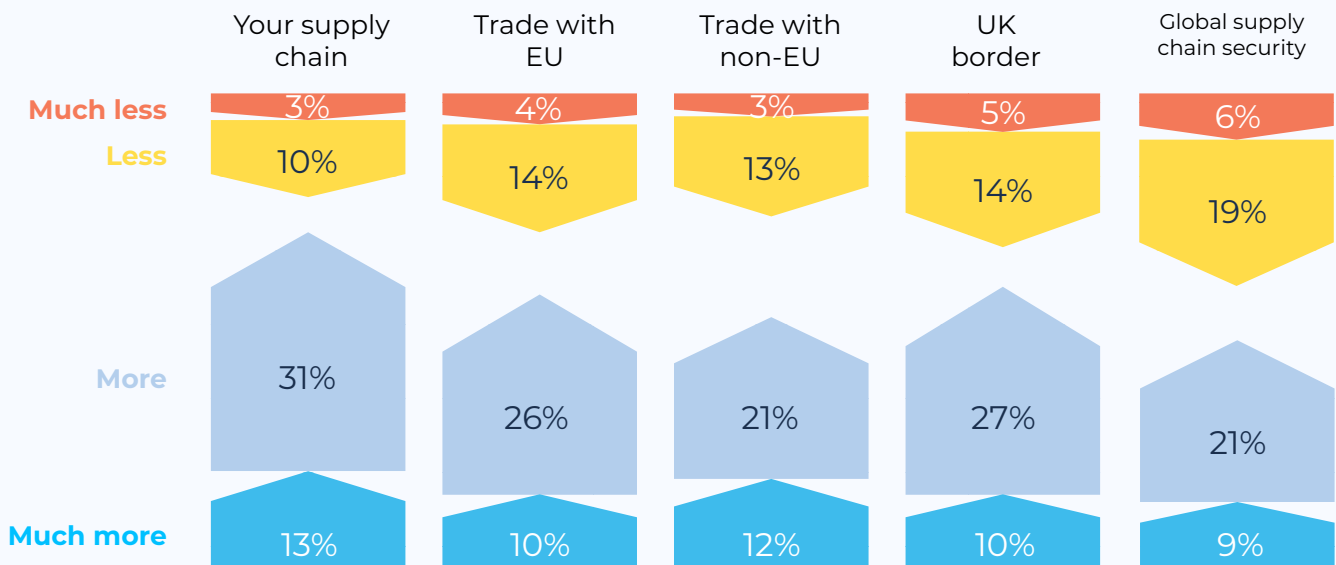
Business confidence in cross border trade is increasing across the board. They are notably more confident in their own supply chain than in global supply chains in general. Confidence in managing trade with EU and with non-EU markets grew in both 2021-2 and 2022-3 (Figure 6).

Figure 6

% respondents saying in November 2023 that they are confident in...



...and perceived CHANGE in level of confidence 2023



Changes to UK import controls



Changes to UK import controls

The UK is introducing the final pieces of its post-Brexit import regime in 2024, under the Border Target Operating Model (BTOM). This simplifies and improves on the highly bureaucratic regime inherited from the EU but presents several challenges for the border and trading businesses.

Food, animal and plant trade with the EU is most impacted due to the absence of any meaningful UK import controls since Brexit. This trade now faces sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) controls on products arriving in the UK, from pet food to pizzas and potted plants.

Food, animal and plant trade from outside the EU should experience a lessening of the SPS burden. Until now, this trade faced UK controls exactly as they were inherited from the EU. The new regime removes the need for certificates on a wide range of products and introduces new digital options for certification.

Traders are largely aware of these changes (Figure 7). Most see them in a broadly positive light, with no significant difference between EU and non-EU trade (Figure 8)

Figure 7

% of all respondents who import products or raw materials into the UK

- know a lot about it
- know a little about it
- heard of it but don't know anything about it
- never heard of it

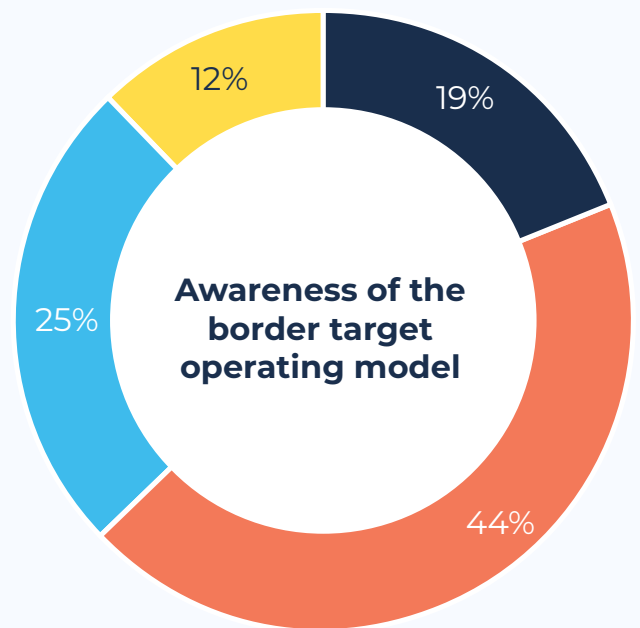
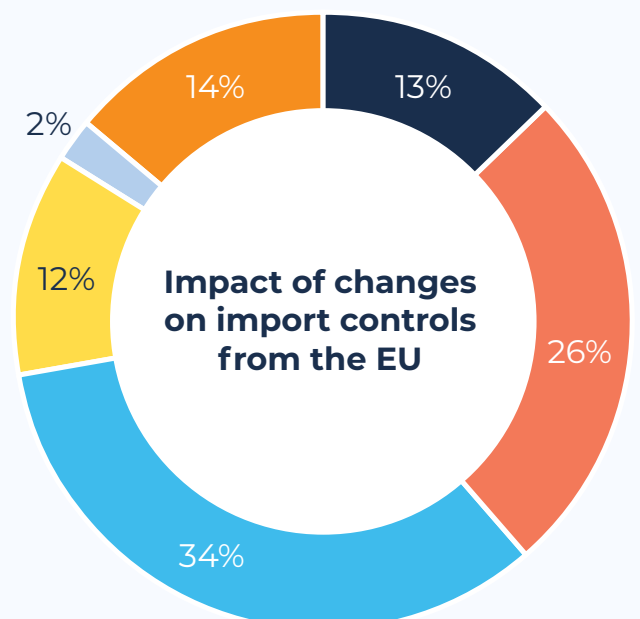


Figure 8

% of all respondents who import from the EU

- very positive impact
- somewhat positive impact
- neither positive nor negative impact
- somewhat negative impact
- very negative impact
- don't know



“It’s a challenge to keep up with new UK regulations. There are things that South African local authorities don’t know. We get contradicting information.”

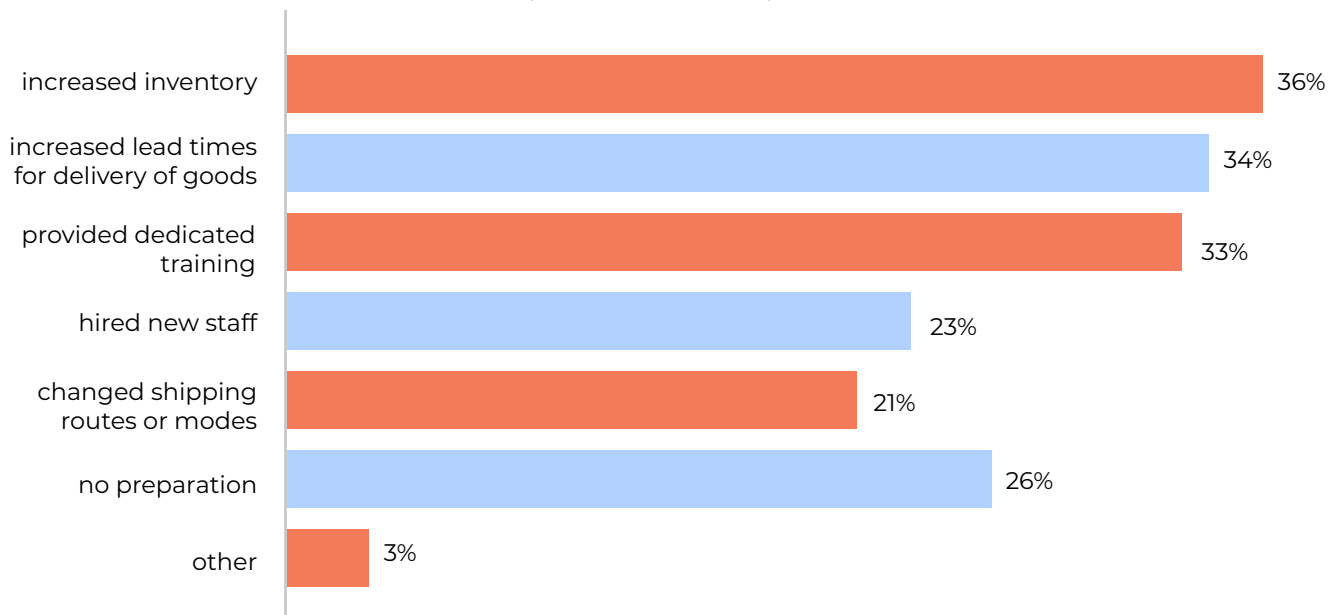
Head of Operations, Pet products manufacturer

Their approach to the changes is similar to the approach we see in other post-EU adaptations: a third have increased lead times and inventory, but 26% have made no preparations at all (Figure 9).

Figure 9

Preparations for new import controls in relation to imports from the EU

% of all respondents who import from the EU



This trade faces a particular challenge due to the perishable nature of the product. Fresh food supply chains cannot be extended indefinitely and even a few additional hours significantly reduces the value of a product.

How this trade evolves over 2024 will be of acute importance to the many UK businesses that trade with the EU, and of particular interest to an incoming administration.

“The rules on plants and animal products keep changing... [they are] a significant challenge for those [importers].”

Freight and Customs Trainer

UK trade and customs traffic in 2022



UK trade and customs traffic in 2022

UK trade

UK export values were broadly stable in the 11 months to November 2023 (Figures 10 & 11). Exports to the EU were flat compared to the same period in 2022, continuing at approximately pre-Brexit levels on an inflation-adjusted basis. Exports to the rest of the world were similarly flat.

Imports from the EU remained the dominant component of the UK's import mix (56%). These too changed little across the 11 months to November 2023 compared to 2022 (Figure 10). The biggest change was in UK imports from the rest of the world, which fell by around 14% on an inflation-adjusted basis.

Volumes passing through sea ports also remained stable over a similar period. They

fell 2% in tonnage terms over the first three quarters of 2023, albeit on a slight rise in moved units. RORO traffic into the UK remains suppressed since Brexit. This appears to reflect, at least in part, reduced use of the landbridge from France to Ireland. As in previous years, the slightly different dynamic in trade and port usage reflects the fact that not everything that enters (and then exits) the UK is formally imported into it.

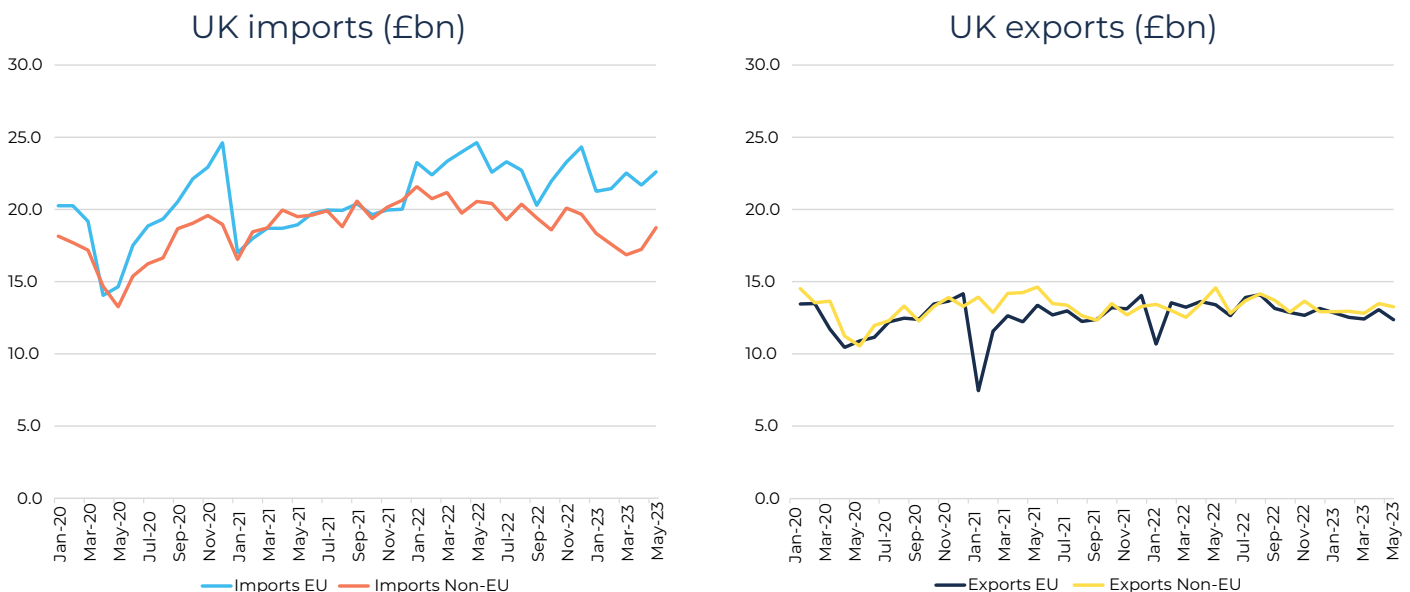
We see stagnant economic growth translating into stagnant trade. Nevertheless, relatively high levels of trade in historical terms imply the border continues to work hard.

“We bought some containers from China, costing about \$10,000 per container. Now, prices have significantly decreased in the freight market worldwide.”

Supply Chain Executive, Spices import and export

Figure 10

UK inflation-adjusted export performance flat for both EU and non-EU



Trade with the EU

Based on 2022 and provisional 2023 port usage data a number of patterns worth noting emerge in EU-UK transport.

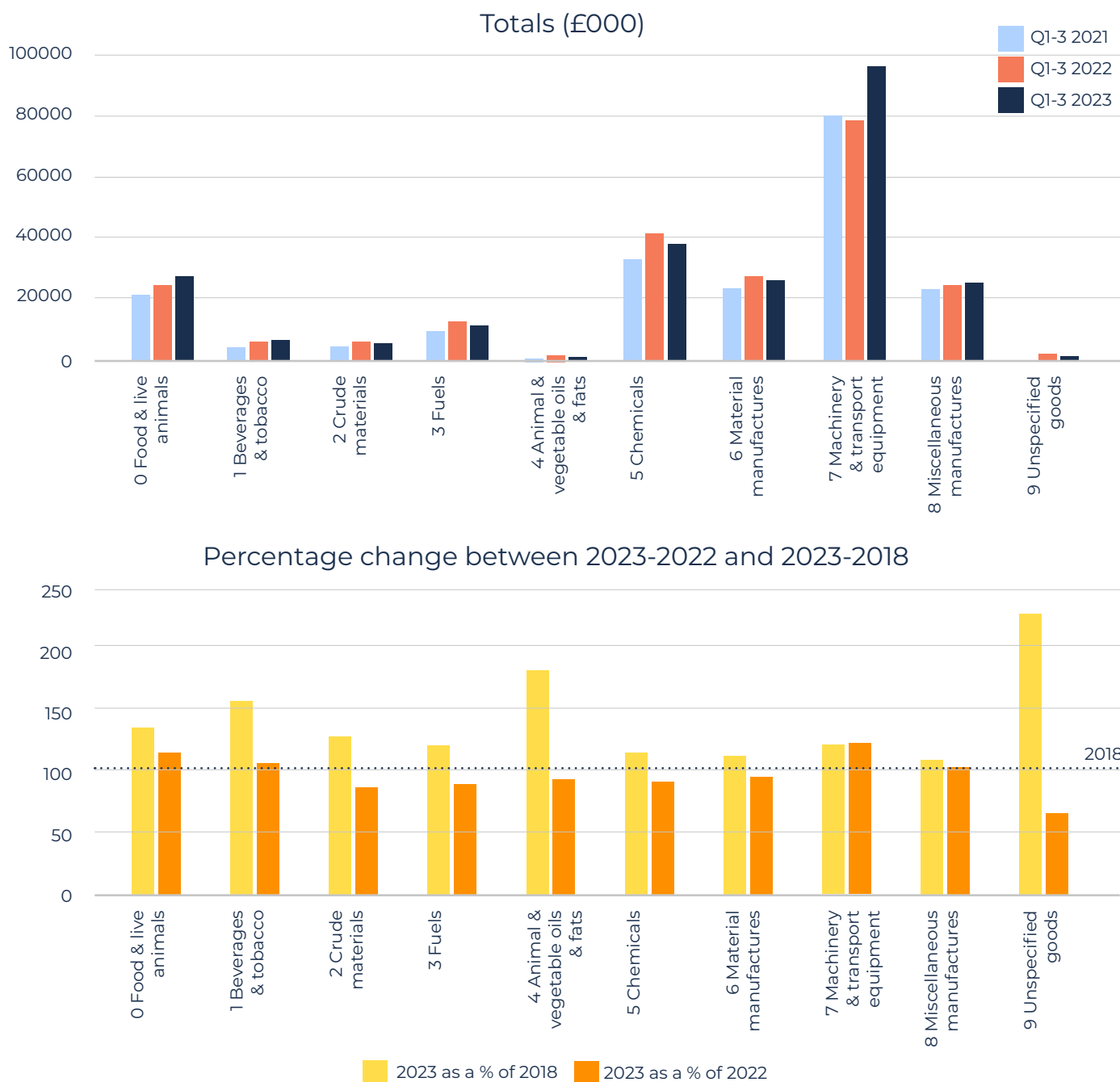
A small number of geographically advantageous – but potentially bottlenecked - routes continue to dominate EU-UK goods trade. Grimsby's growth as an alternative to Dover for sea crossings to Europe (especially for unaccompanied and P2P journeys) suggests trade looking for options away from the south coast. (Figure 12 & 16). The effect has reduced Dover's market share, but the Dover Straits

crossing continues to account for around seven in ten accompanied truck journeys.

Liverpool is consolidating a strong position on Irish sea routes to both Belfast and Larne, perhaps leveraging its onward UK connections (Figures 13 & 16). Traders appear to be choosing routes directly into Northern Ireland to avoid transit across the Irish customs territory. The sharp fall in Holyhead volumes continues, which almost certainly mirrors falls at the other end of the landbridge in Dover (Figure 17).

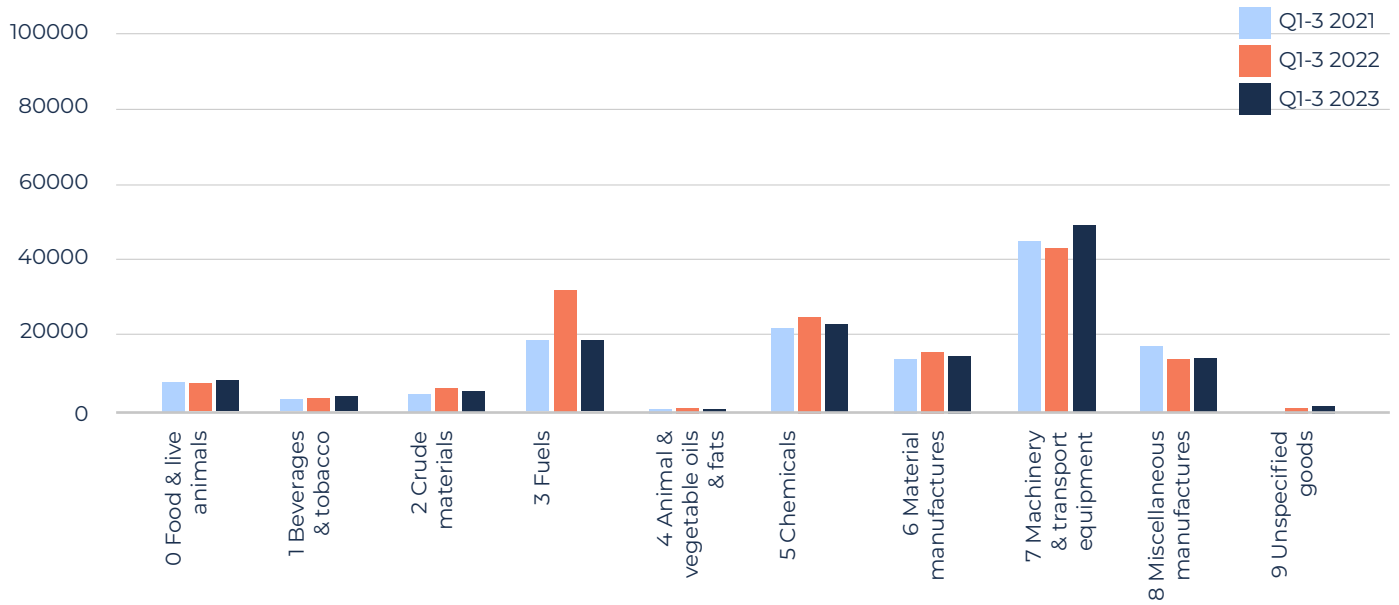
Figure 11

UK imports from the EU were broadly flat 2022-23, up 20% by value from 2018



UK exports to the EU were down 5% 2022-2023; broadly flat on 2018

Totals (£000)



Percentage change between 2023-2022 and 2023-2018

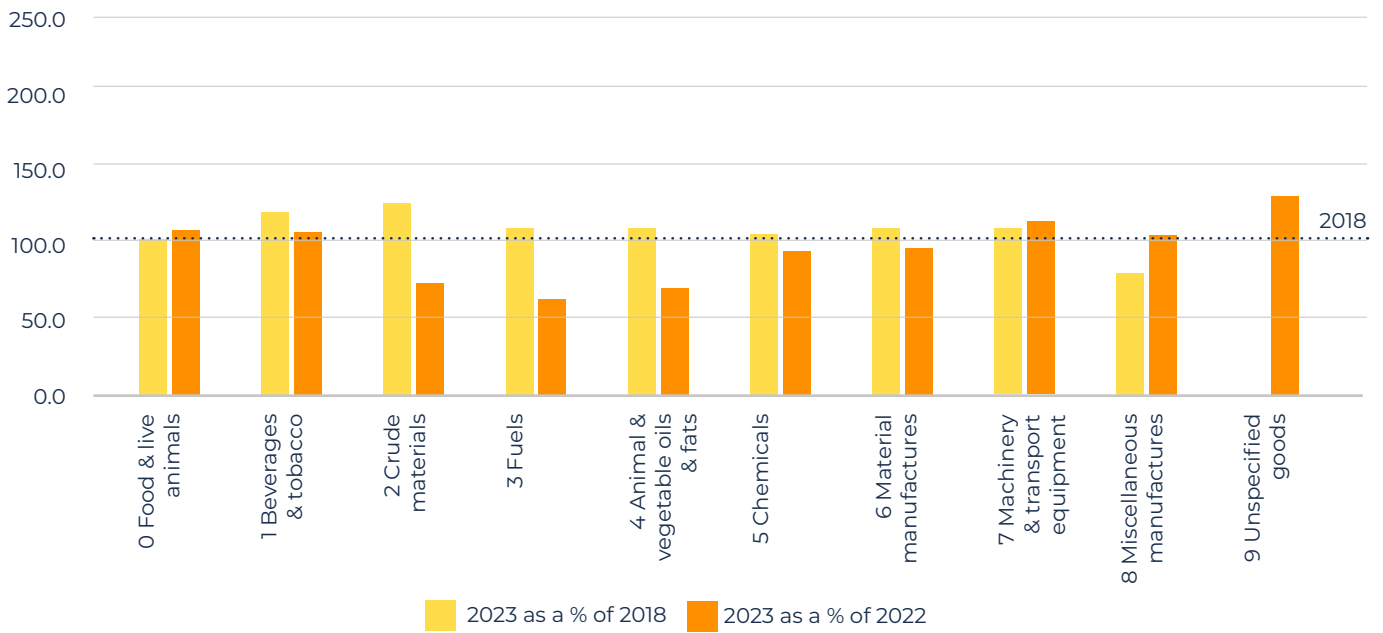
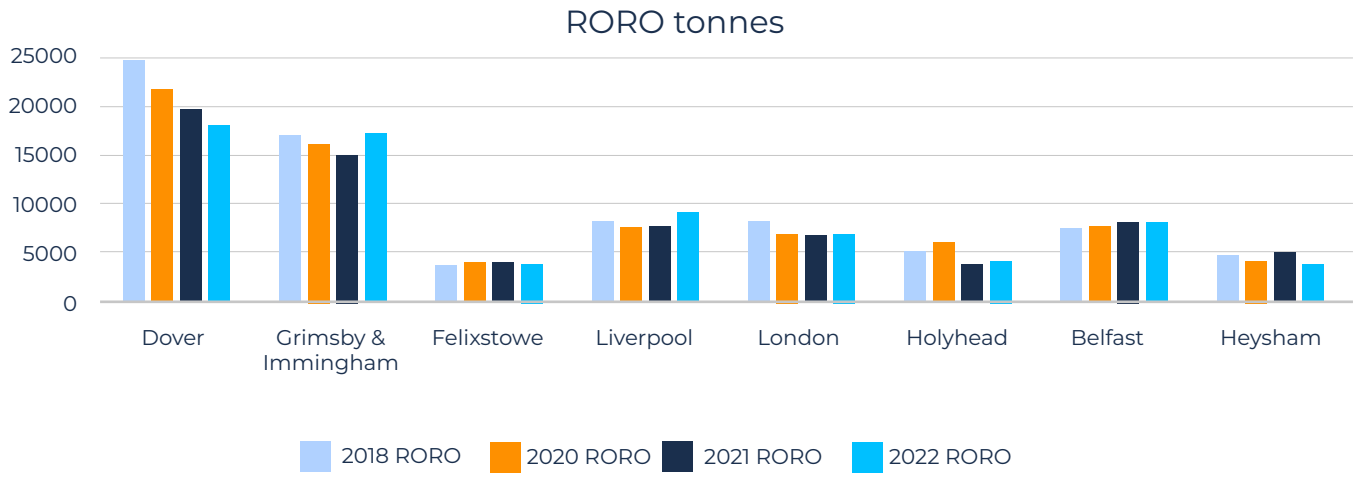


Figure 12

Some continued shifts in routing patterns



LOLO tonnes

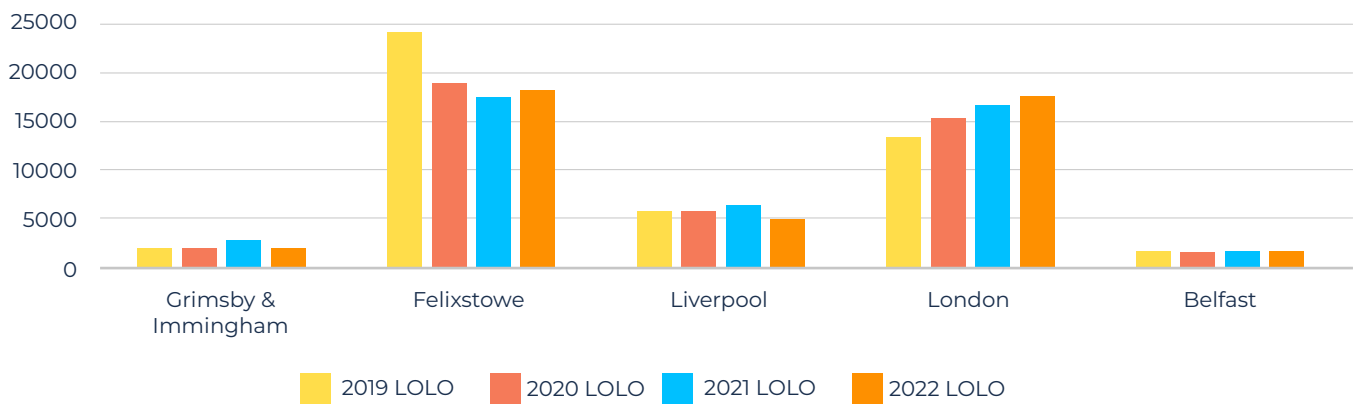
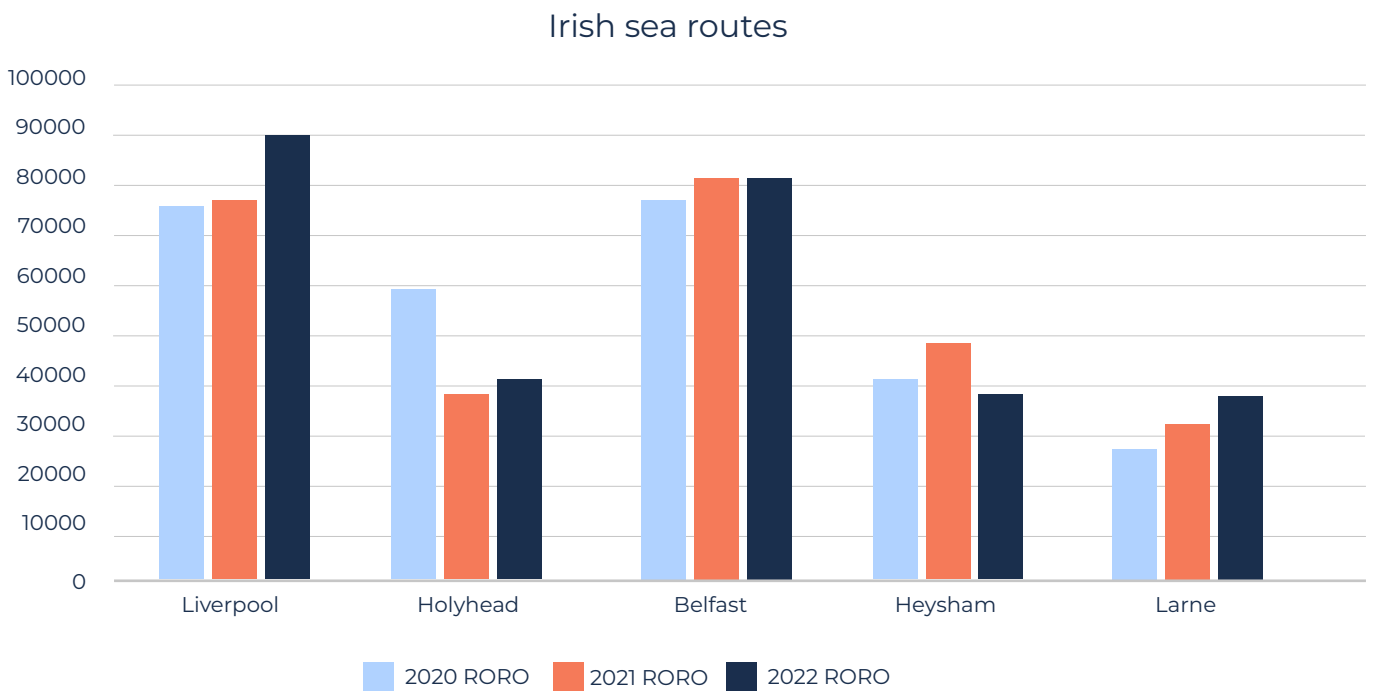


Figure 13

Liverpool consolidates on Irish Sea routes



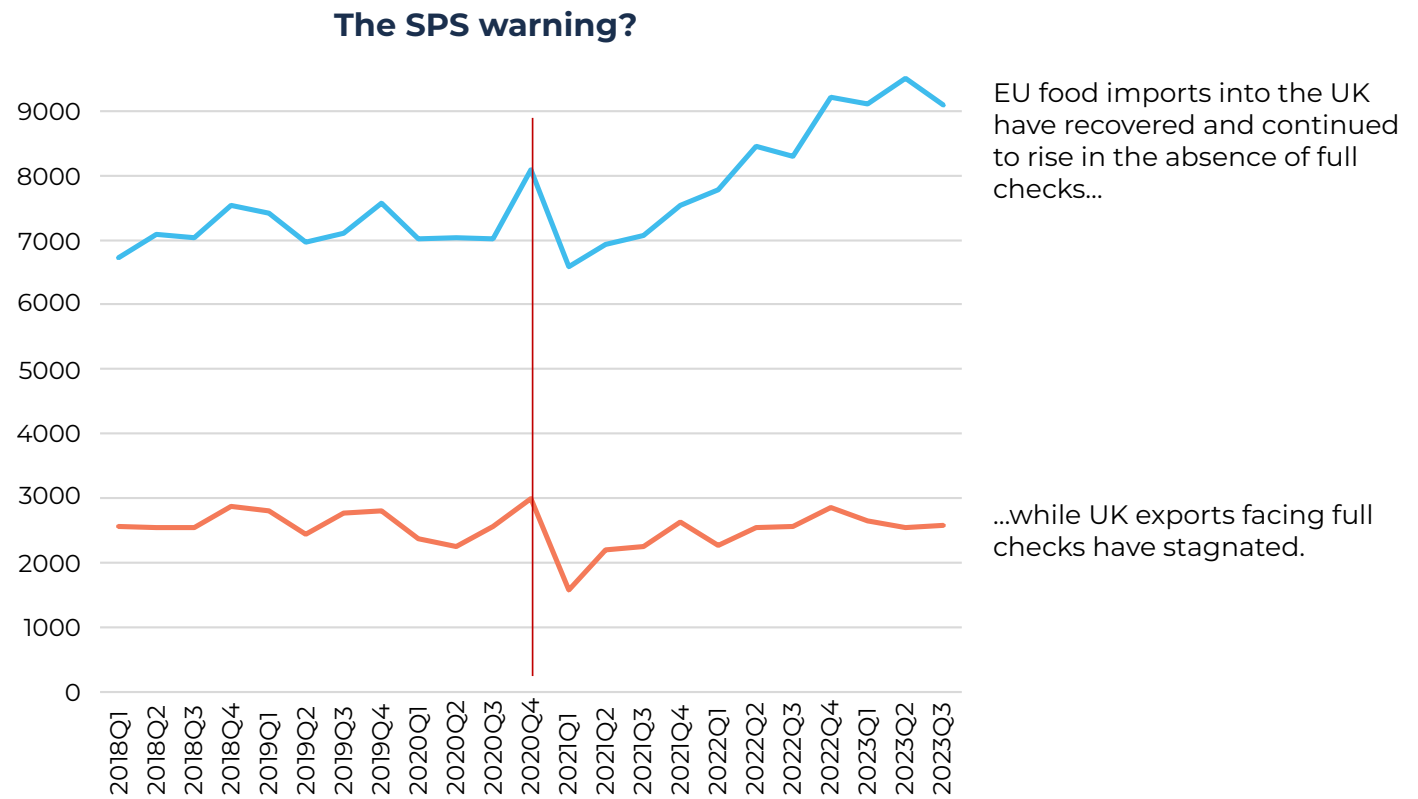
A warning for food importers?

One interesting possible message in the EU-UK trade data relates to trade in animals and food products. EU exports to food and animal products to the UK have grown by around a third in value since 2018. Even adjusted for inflation this is a material increase.

In contrast, UK food and animal product exports to the EU have plateaued (Figure 14) This is important when set against the fact that UK

exports face the standard battery of EU SPS requirements, while EU exporters and their UK importers continue to benefit from deferred regulatory requirements. The experience of UK food exporters is a potential warning for the disruption and potential higher fixed costs of food trade when full checks are introduced on the inbound route.

Figure 14



“Animal by-products cause the biggest challenges with imports... it costs £60 to send and process a cheque for Port Health.”

Purchasing Manager, Pet industry wholesaler



RORO/LOLO change

The small fall in RORO that has been a trend over the last five years continued in 2022 and 2023 (albeit at a slower pace in the latter). This may reflect reduced landbridge use. Dover continued to lose both total volumes and historic share, which would support this proposition. LOLO remains broadly flat and has fallen back slightly in terms of its share of the EU-UK mix.

Within RORO, the share of unaccompanied consignments has fallen slightly after rising for several years, although it remains marginally higher than pre-Brexit levels (Figure 15). This may suggest traders are reversing a previous trend towards unaccompanied units - a practice likely to have been used to avoid the risk of paying drivers caught in border delays.

Figure 15

Continued evolution in RORO

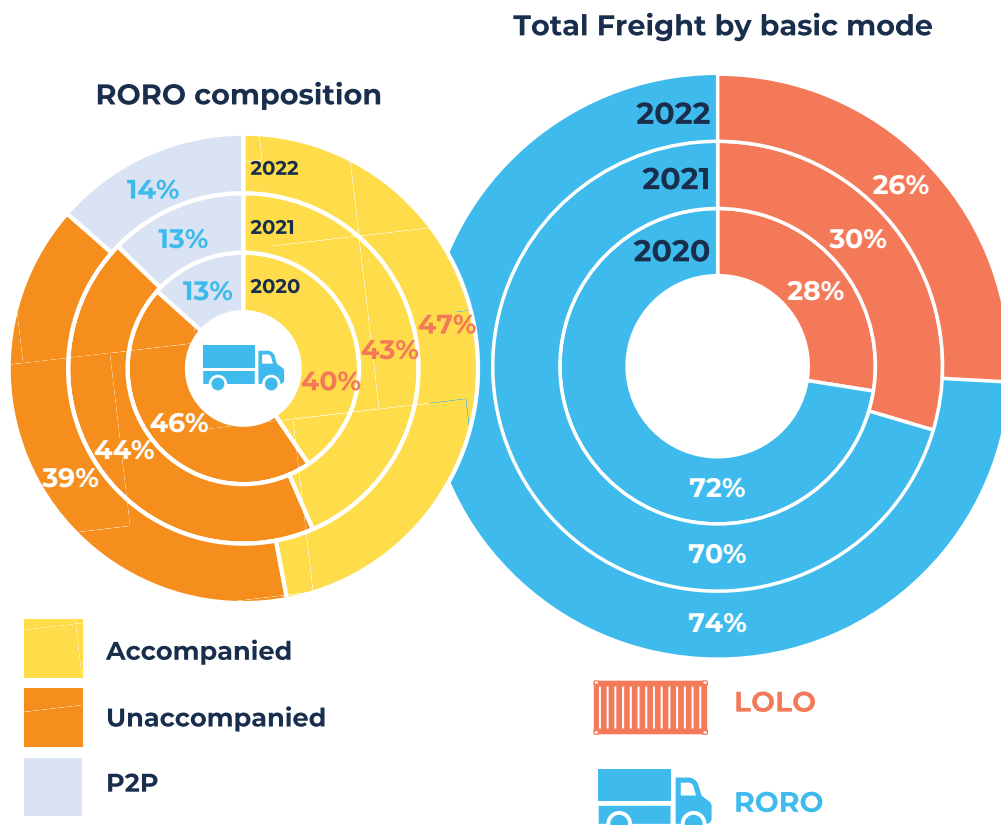


Figure 16

EU-UK routes: Dover's bottleneck still stands out

74% total UK-EU sea-borne carriage

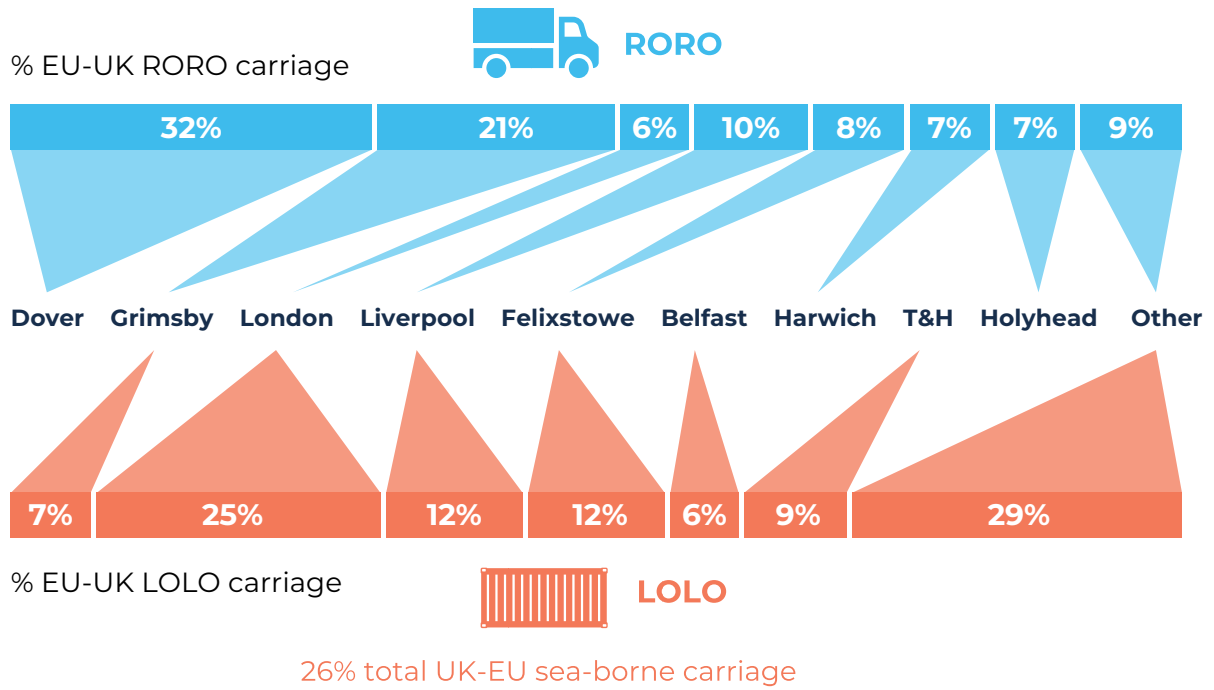
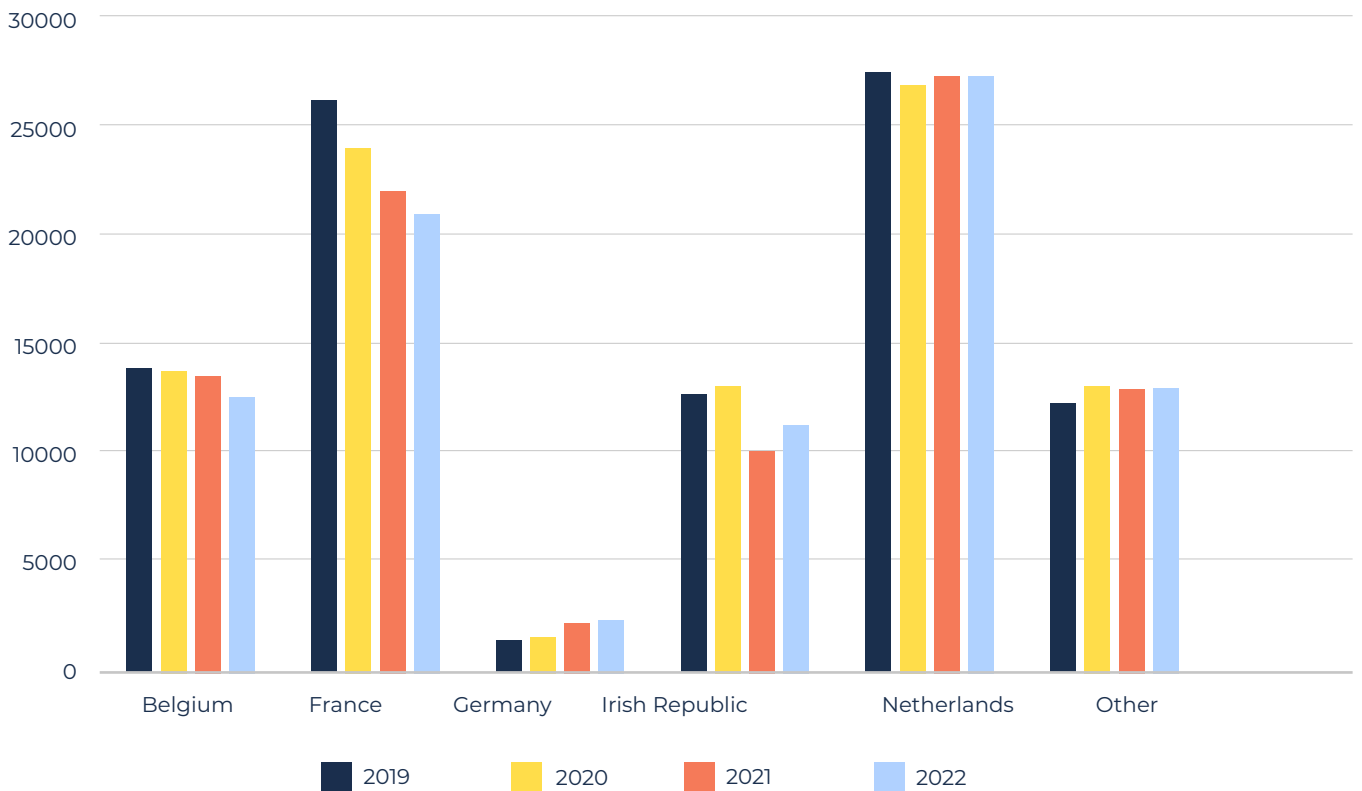


Figure 17

Country trade volumes reflect port patterns

EU-UK short sea LOLO + RORO main freight (tonnes)



The state of the border

The state of the border

Borders lost none of their political salience in 2023. As governments worry about control of what gets into – and out of – their territories, borders' relevance to business increases. The post-Cold War march towards a borderless world has gone into reverse. It will not come back.

The UK provides a stark example in the form of Brexit. It also provides early evidence of how businesses adjust to re-emergence of trade borders. We see in this report that

- Businesses continue to adjust to the UK's decision to assume full control of its border after its departure from the EU
- Businesses trading with the EU are more likely to report lengthening delivery times as parties on both sides of the border adapt
- Border function remains weak - with notably complicated processes and poor IT - and a long way from being the 'best border in the world'
- Decision-makers have registered additional UK import requirements in 2024 but this will add strain to a struggling border

Most of the companies in our survey established their international supply chains in the relative stability of the 1990s and 2000s, or before. Over 70% of the businesses which responded have been trading for over 10 years.

These businesses now face a world in which border requirements are becoming more prominent. This has a direct impact on business decisions about the costs, risks and resilience of their supply. We have seen evidence of those calculations in each of our reports (2021, 2022); we see them again in 2023.

The border experienced by businesses is not just a line on a map or a booth in an airport. Ports, airlines, ferry and train operators are all part of the machinery that enables goods and services to move – and which controls what enters and leaves a territory. So too are the agents and logistics businesses that ship goods. They are private businesses, operating in a competitive market. Their primary role is to serve their customers and ship goods but they also have a critical role in securing the border.

No government can police 100% of what enters its territory. They must rely on businesses' compliance with regulations. Information provided by traders is the first line of defence of the border.

To function effectively, a border must serve the needs of those using it as well as – and in order to – meet the needs of the governments defending it. That is what this report, and its predecessors, look at. And in many respects, it suggests the UK border is failing.

This research into businesses' experience of the border helps us understand how the UK trades and how the government can control the border.

UK businesses continue to bear the costs of adapting to new trade arrangements.

Supply chain expectations lengthened again, after increases in 2021 and 2022. Half of the respondents increased their delivery times and nearly half increased their stock levels. 54% experienced an increase in delays at the UK border. They continue to apply for HMRC authorisations, purchase customs software and employ new staff – all activities associated with managing border processes.

Some of this may be business-as-usual investment rather than purely additional resources. However, delays bringing goods into and out of the UK remain the most cited reason for longer delivery times – for the third year running.

The length of border delays has increased since 2022 and border checks are still the primary explanation for delays on imports. However, businesses are significantly less likely to cite border issues as a reason for increasing stock. This is in contrast to 2021 when border delays were near the top of the list of reasons for increasing stock – joint second to ‘concern about global supply chains’.

Border delays now rank 8th after demand management considerations such as bulk discounts, preparing for increasing demand, expectations of future price rises and increasing orders. This suggests that purchasers are reconciling themselves to longer delays and pushing the costs of the border onto their suppliers and the supply chain in the form of longer delivery times.

Costs of dealing with cross-border supply chains continue to weigh on decision-makers. 65% reported an increase in fees since the start of 2023. Inflation was the primary driver of overall cost increases (for 69%), although 40% cited border and customs difficulties. For 44% of respondents, costs for staff to handle import and export increased; for 43% it stayed about the same as 2022. Freight and warehouse costs also increased.





Businesses trading with the EU are experiencing the biggest hit.

They demonstrate bigger adjustments across options covered by our survey – delivery times, costs and changes to business operations like employing new staff or buying IT – compared to their counterparts dealing with the rest of the world.

Businesses that import from the EU were nearly twice as likely to report increased delivery times than businesses that import from the rest of the world (58% vs 30%). This should be of particular concern bearing in mind that the UK has not yet applied the full range of its import controls: friction on inbound goods will increase in 2024. Businesses that export to the EU were also significantly more likely to report increased delivery times (54% vs 33%).

Similarly, traders with the EU were more likely to have increased stock levels (49% vs 31%) than traders with the rest of the world, notwithstanding the general view that demand and concern about supply chains were bigger factors behind this than border issues.

The same picture applies to costs: EU traders were also more likely to report increased spending on staff, software or applications for HMRC customs authorisations. 49% of businesses trading with the EU reported an increase in warehousing costs versus 29% of those who do not. 50% of businesses exporting to the EU reported an increase in staffing costs versus 23% of those who do not.

Border function remains weak. The UK government has made much of its desire for the “world’s most effective border” by 2025.

Our research does not evidence any notable progress in this direction. The border is performing much as it has since the UK left the EU: patchily.

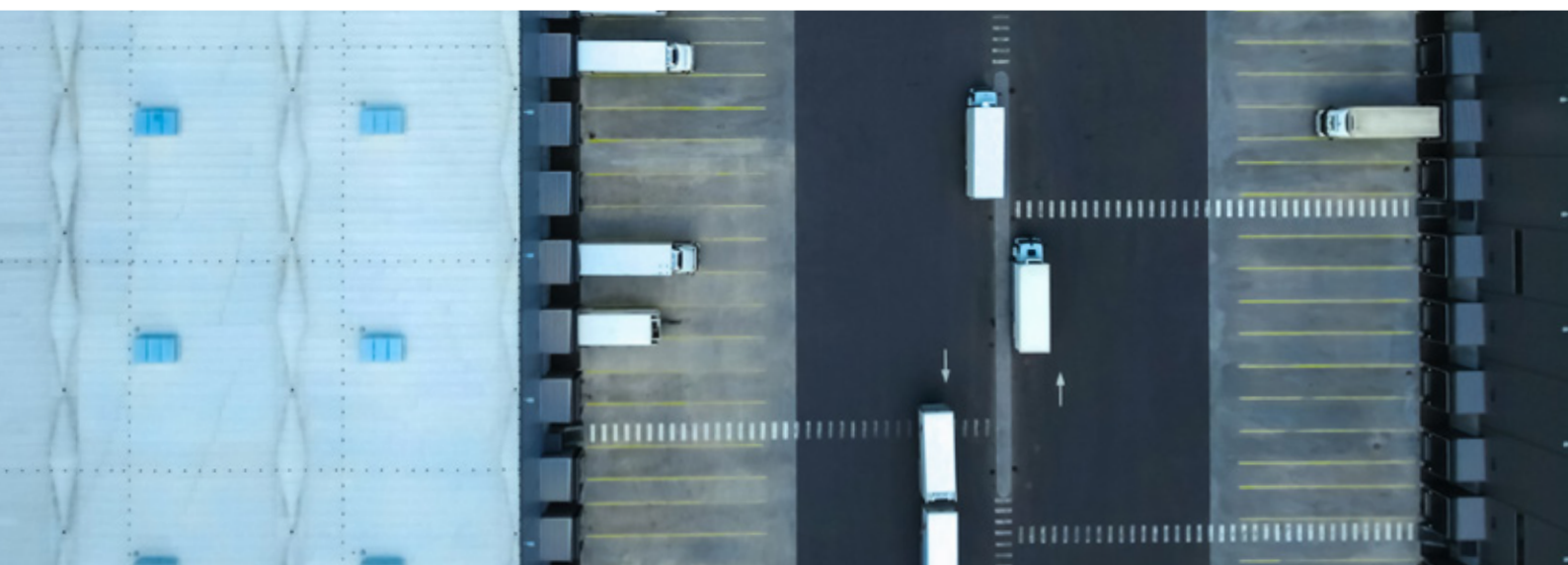
The government has suspended large parts of UK import controls, in the interests of maintaining trade flow. Meanwhile, businesses have adapted to what controls have been applied. But the underlying function has not improved.

Businesses in our survey report a cumbersome experience. Their part in the operation of an effective border is frustrated by complex processes and poor IT. Both of these make compliance difficult for honest businesses and create opportunities for dishonest ones.

Complexity in sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) controls means a business in South Africa making pet food for the UK must import meat from Europe, not Southern Africa, to satisfy the paperwork – notwithstanding that the final product is sufficiently processed to render any ingredients biologically safe. Trade is made more expensive and competition is reduced. Just as importantly government loses out on reliable information as businesses struggle to interpret regulations.

“Difficulties? Making returns from the UK. When customers want to return items, it carries extra costs and time to get back to their warehouses in the EU.”

Operations Manager. Ecommerce manufacturing and imports





More controls will add strain.

Most respondents (64%) know something of the UK's new import controls under the Border Target Operating Model (BTOM). These are due from January 2024 and are designed to equalise the treatment of EU and non-EU goods, particularly for food, animal and plant products. They should simplify bio-security controls for all traders.

While they will represent an additional burden for EU traders, compared to the non-existent controls currently in place, they nevertheless represent a simplification compared to the inherited regime that would have applied had the UK imposed it. 39% of businesses expect the changes to have a positive impact; 34% say the impact will be neither positive nor negative. Those expectations are broadly similar between EU and non-EU traders.

Businesses are using tried and tested border management strategies to prepare for these controls. They are further increasing inventory (36%), stretching lead times for delivery (34%), training (33%) and hiring new staff (23%). Or doing nothing (25%).

Signs of preparation are encouraging but also concerning. The UK government is starting to apply missing controls without meaningfully addressing the functional weakness of the existing set-up.

The additional controls will create more demand on the border, for example for officials to manage bio-security controls. Meanwhile the absence of meaningful modernisation – for example in automating documentary checks – leaves the border vulnerable to capacity bottlenecks.

This will have two effects: either trade will suffer further delays or, more likely, the government will not fully apply its stated controls. The UK risks creating a Potemkin border with the appearance of controls but ambiguous and poorly enforced requirements. This serves no one, leaving businesses in legal jeopardy and the government without critical means to protect national borders.

Neither government nor business can ignore the border's growing importance.

The UK will have a new government in the next 18 months. The next administration has an opportunity to reinvigorate the administration of a critical aspect of national life. Borders are growing in political salience.

The UK economy will continue to rely on trade but rising global conflict will raise the importance of controlling who and what enters the UK and what critical technology leaves. The UK border is central to those requirements.

Businesses, meanwhile, must adapt to changing regulations and manage increasingly fragile long-distance supply chains. We find extensive evidence of the costs involved in doing this, all of which come at the expense of overall productivity.

Simplified processes and greater investment in automated data transfer have the potential to radically reduce that expense and, critically, the uncertainty and risks which weigh on commercial decisions.

“One thing that would help? Consolidation of the different declaration systems into one.”

Logistics manager. Automotive parts manufacturer



Approach



Approach

The findings in this report draw on research using a variety of methodologies and data sources to build a comprehensive picture of experiences of using the UK border:

- **Analysis of trade statistics.**

We reviewed trade data from official sources, including ONS and DfT. The findings from this review provide context for the original primary research and describe the UK experience of trade. All figures are inflation adjusted, except where noted otherwise.

- **Survey of trading businesses.**

We conducted an online survey of 300 senior decision-makers at UK businesses who import products into the UK, export products from the UK and/or carry out international deliveries originating from the UK. The findings from the survey provide high-level insight into businesses' experiences of using the border – and how this has changed in the past 12 months.

- **In-depth interviews with trading businesses.** We conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 9 senior decision-makers at businesses with direct experience of using the UK border. The findings are used to provide explanatory insight and illustrative colour to supplement the findings from the quantitative survey.

Survey fieldwork was completed between 29th November and 7th December 2023. Interviews were completed between November 2023 and January 2024.

Where relevant, this report compares findings with the findings from our previous State of the Border research. The survey of businesses replicated the questionnaire from previous surveys – but changes to sample composition mean that comparisons should be treated with caution. Note that in some cases totals may not add to 100% due to rounding.



Profile of survey respondents

We surveyed a total of 307 senior decision-makers (Director-level and above) involved in UK import/export/delivery.

Commercial Characteristics

Figure 18

Number of employees

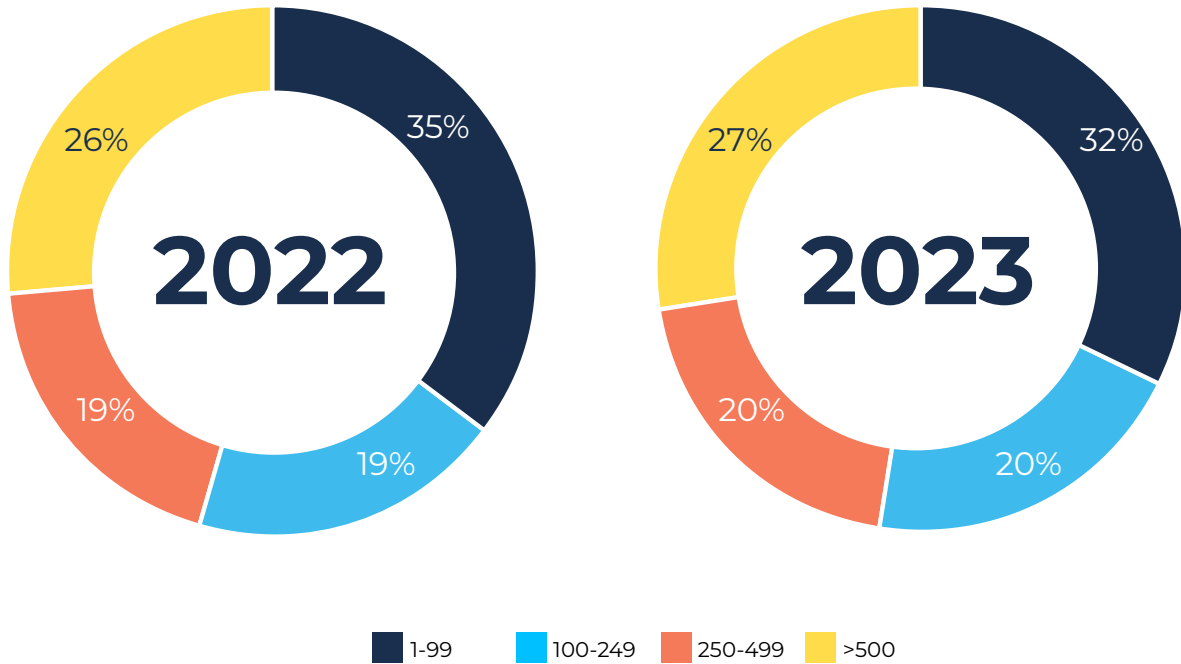


Figure 19

Length of operations in the UK

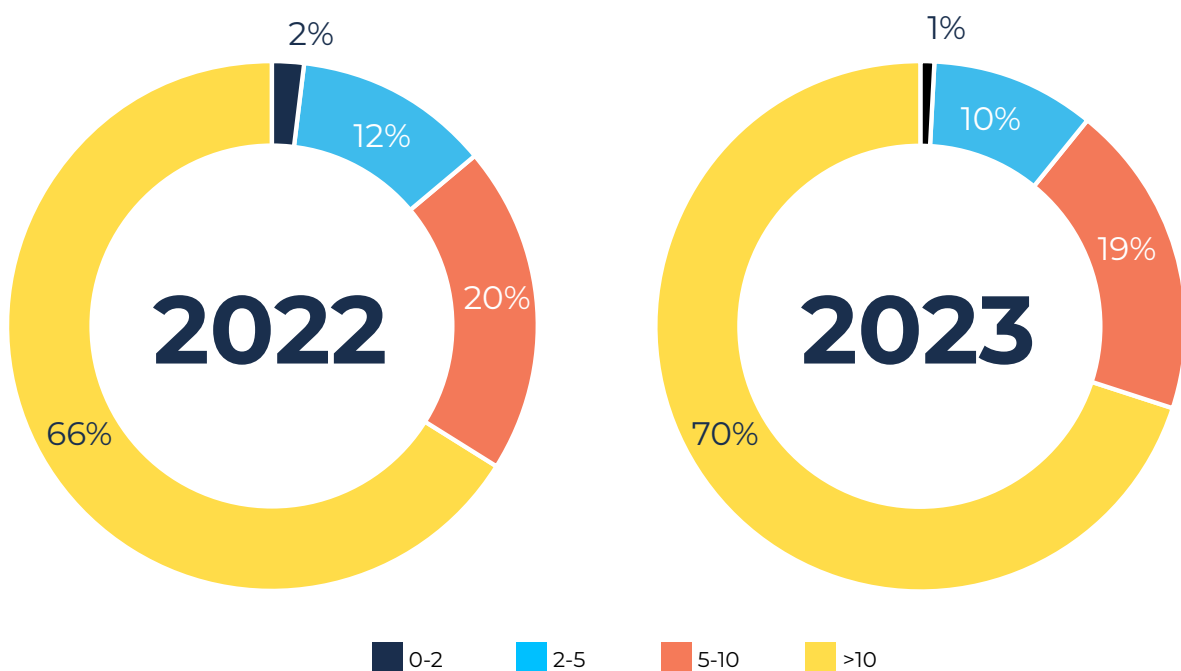
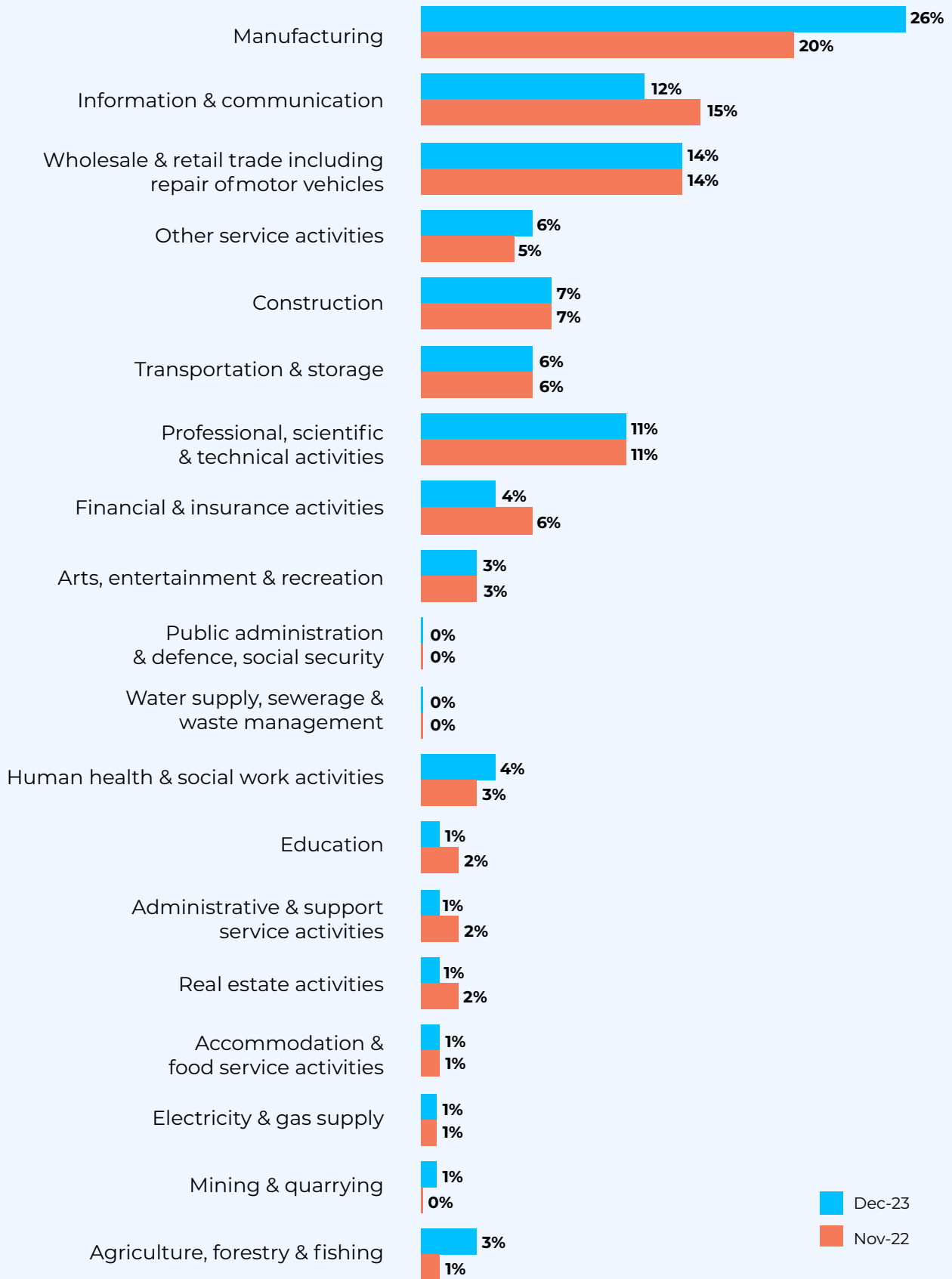


Figure 20

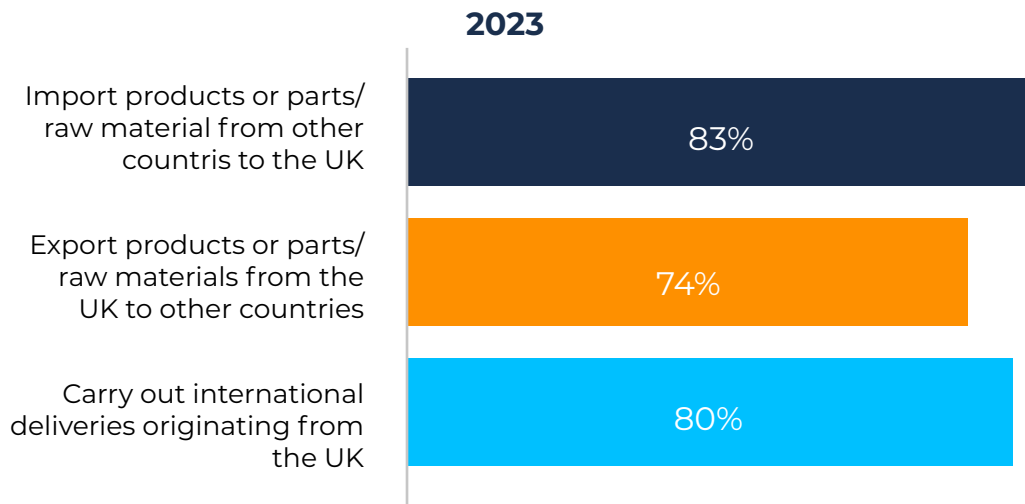
Sector composition

% of all respondents selecting each sector as the one they operate in



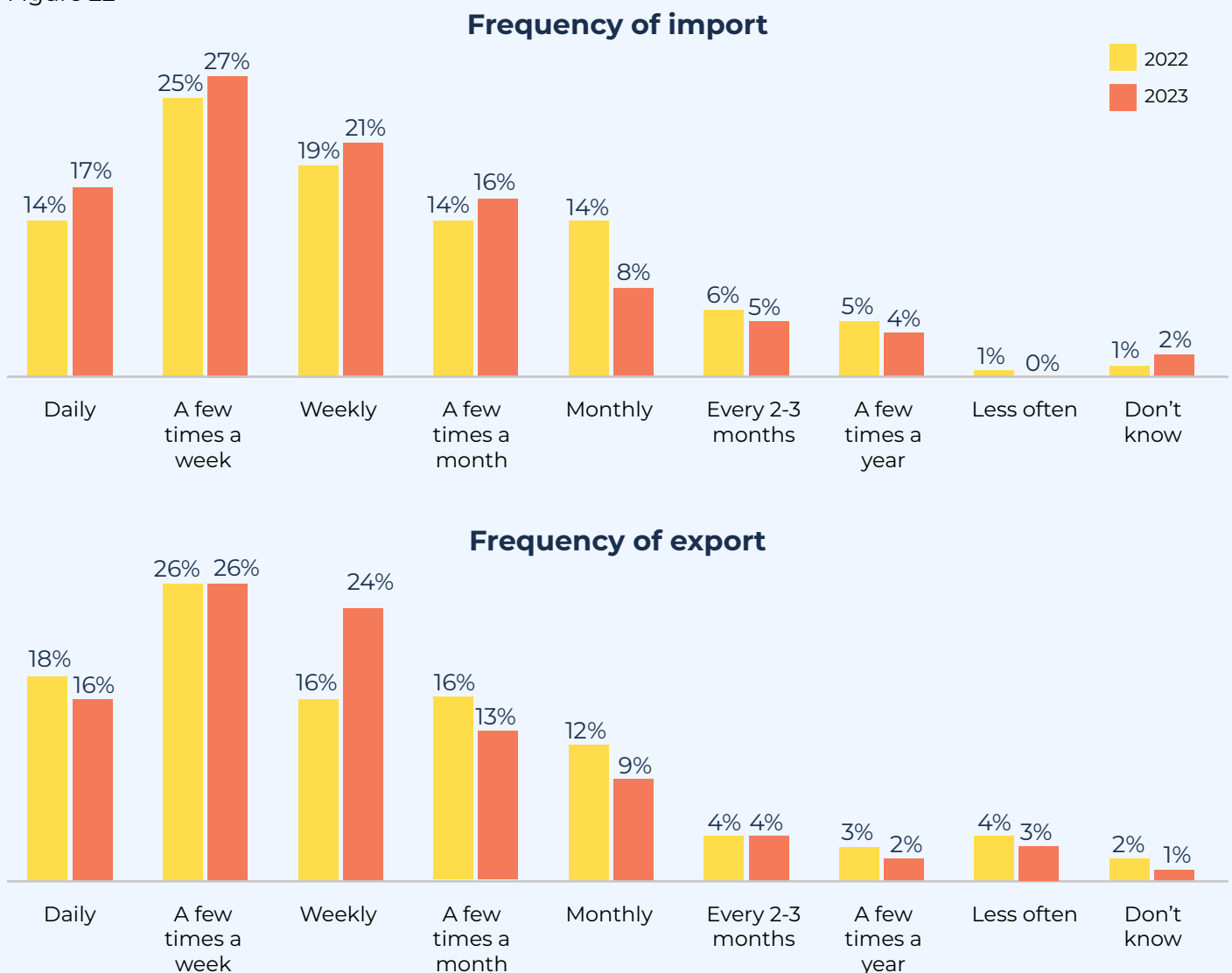
Trade characteristics

Figure 21



As with the previous survey, no quotas were applied and data are unweighted. Full data tables are available [here](#).

Figure 22





Profile of depth interview respondents

In-depth interviews were conducted with 9 decision-makers with direct experience of using the UK border. Interviews were conducted online and lasted 30-45 minutes.

Customs Implementation

Customs brokerage service.
1000+ employees.

Head of Operations

Pet product manufacturer.
100-249 employees.

COO

Commercial cycle business.
10-49 employees.

Head of Customs Compliance

European wholesale business.
250-499 employees.

Logistics Manager

Automotive parts manufacturer.
50-99 employees.

Supply Chain Executive

Spices import and export.
50-99 employees.

Purchasing Manager

Pet industry wholesaler.
100-249 employees.

Operations Manager

E-commerce manufacturing and imports.
1-5 employees.

Freight and Customs Trainer

Business Association.

Authors

Written by Christopher Salmon and Stephen Adams.

This report was produced by clearBorder and Global Counsel. Polling design and survey analysis led by Emma Morris at Global Counsel. Global Counsel conducted polling between 29th November and 7th December 2023. Interviews were completed between November 2023 and January 2024.

Full survey results are available [here](#).

We are grateful for the support of the UK Major Ports Group in producing this report. Findings, errors and omissions are ours.



About clearBorder

clearBorder helps businesses adjust to and optimise for international trade. We provide online training products for individuals, teams and businesses; independent advice to help businesses adapt supply chains, systems and data; and expert insight into policy and technology shaping the future trade borders.

clearborder.co.uk



Global Counsel

About Global Counsel

Global Counsel is a strategic advisory business with extensive expertise in international trade, regulation and policy. With offices in Brussels, London, Singapore, Washington and Dubai, we help companies and investors manage risk and see opportunities in politics, regulation and public policy.

global-counsel.com



About UK Major Ports Group

The UK Major Ports Group represents nine of the UK's largest port operators, handling 75% of the UK's port volumes. The group's members include some of the busiest ports in the UK, which play a crucial role in facilitating international trade and connecting the UK to global markets.

ukmajorports.org.uk

