



Department for Transport

International Road Freight Statistics, United Kingdom 2020

About this release

This statistical release summarises the latest statistics on the **international** activity of UK registered heavy goods vehicles (HGVs) up to the year ending 31 December 2020. The information is derived from two continuous surveys run by the Department for Transport: the International Road Haulage Survey (IRHS) and the Continuing Survey of Road Goods Transport Northern Ireland (CSRGT NI).

Note: Due to rounding, totals may not appear to equal the sum of their parts.

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Total UK international road freight activity decreased in 2020

In 2020, for UK registered HGVs transporting freight internationally there were...

		Compared to 2019
<p>Goods Lifted</p>	3.2 million tonnes exported from the UK	↓ -20%
	3.4 million tonnes imported to the UK	↓ -17%
	6.6 million tonnes lifted in total	↓ -19%
<p>Goods Moved</p>	1.8 billion tonne kilometres moved from the UK	↓ -27%
	2.0 billion tonne kilometres moved to the UK	↓ -19%
	3.9 billion tonne kilometres moved in total	↓ -23%

- ▶ In 2020, more goods were imported by road to the UK than exported, though both fell compared to 2019.
- ▶ Of the goods lifted by UK HGVs, 99% were to or from the EU15 (see page 8 for definition).
- ▶ Of the goods lifted by UK HGVs, 18% were between the UK and France.
- ▶ [See Tables [RFS0201](#), [RFS0202](#) and [RFS0203](#) for detailed statistics]

Definitions

HGV: A lorry with a plated weight of 3.5 tonnes or more.

Goods lifted: the weight of goods carried, measured in tonnes

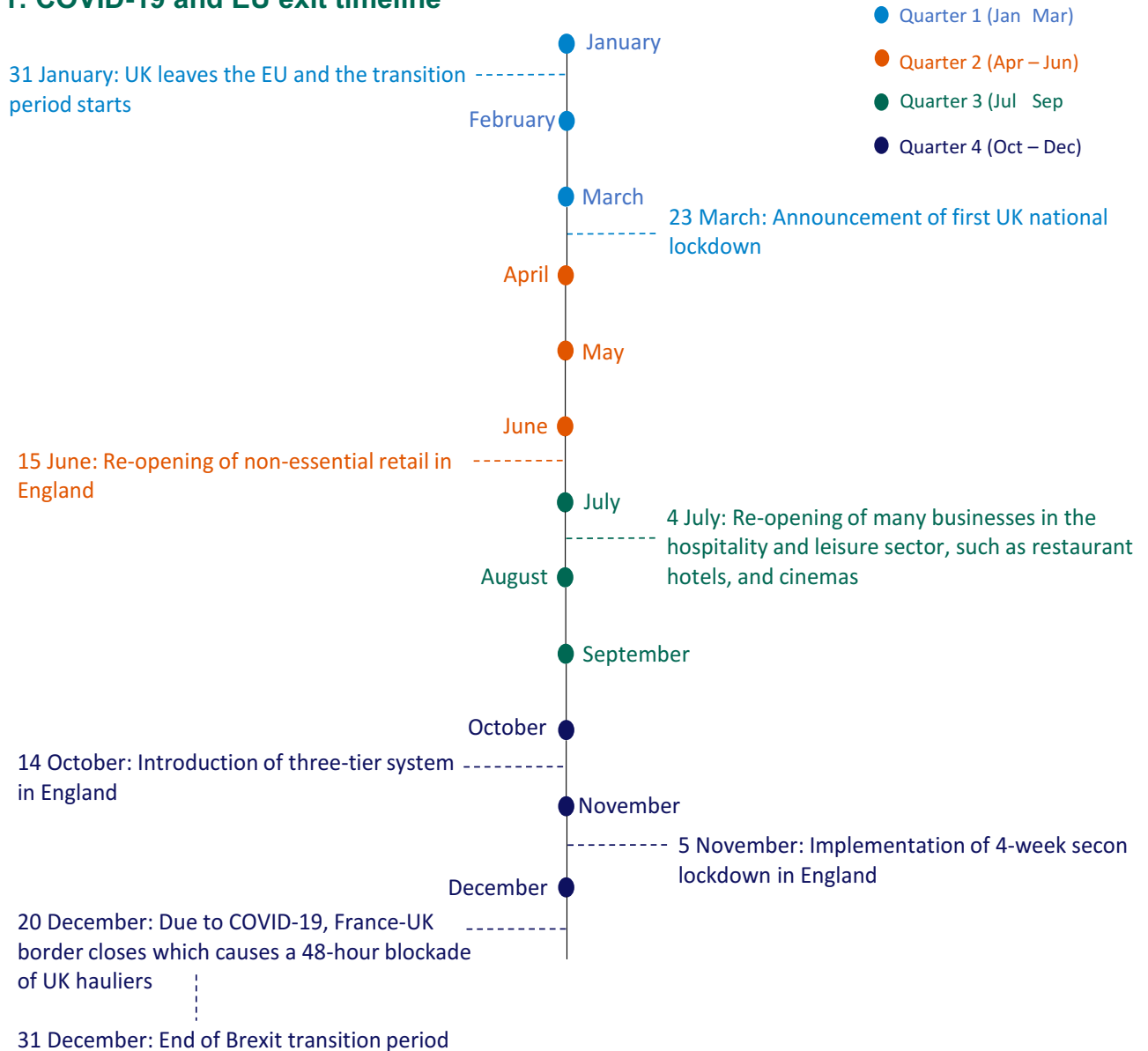
Goods moved: the weight of goods carried, multiplied by the distance hauled, measured in tonne kilometres

Cabotage: road haulage solely within one country by a vehicle registered in another country.

The impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and EU exit on international road freight

These statistics cover the period following the government's announcement of measures to limit the impact and transmission of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. COVID-19 has had a wide impact on UK society and economic activity since March 2020. These figures should be considered within this context, and so a timeline has been provided to assist.

Chart 1: COVID-19 and EU exit timeline

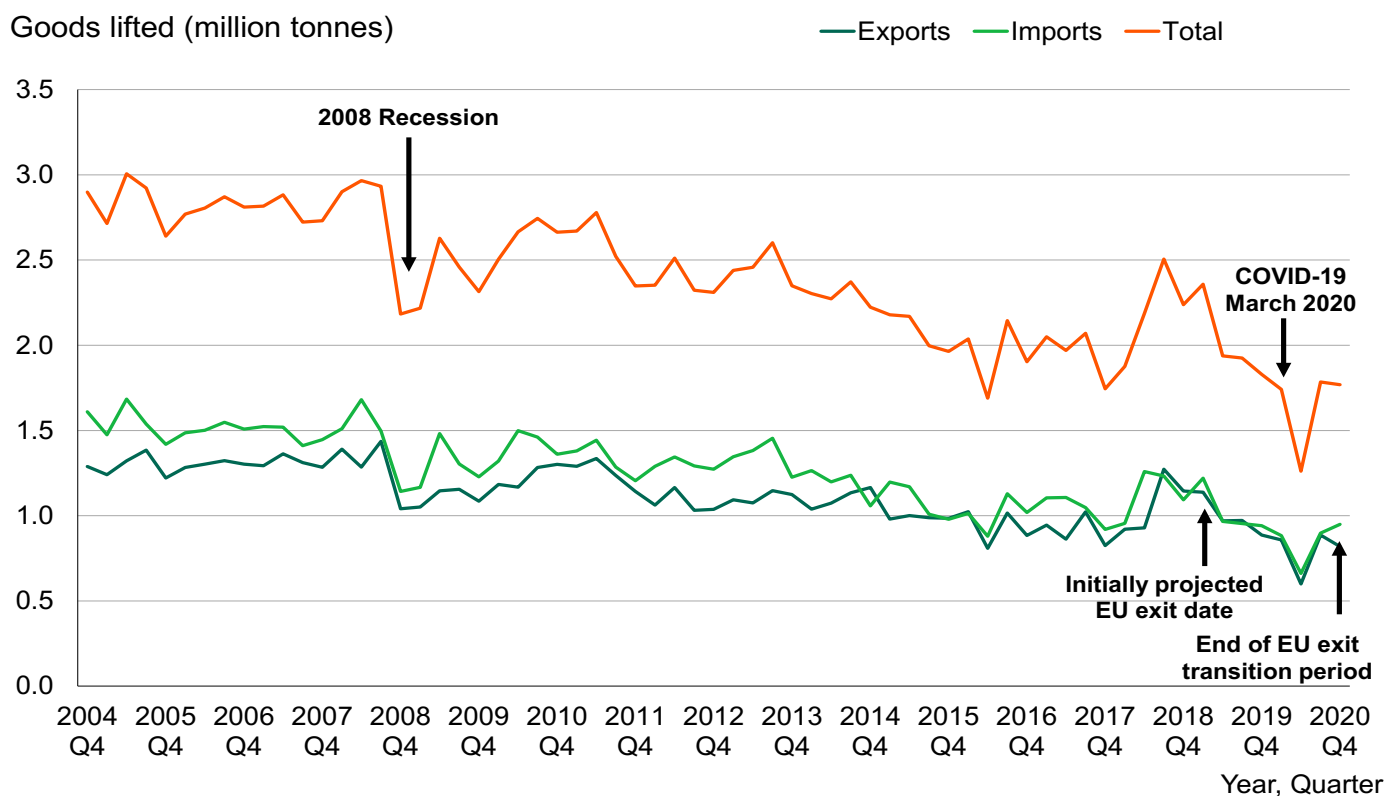


Impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) on international road freight

In 2020 the amount of goods lifted by UK-registered HGVs travelling to or from the UK was 6.6 million tonnes, down 19% on 2019, the largest year on year decrease since our data collection began in 1993. For comparison, there was a 12% decrease in goods lifted in the year following the 2008 recession, which was the previous largest decrease over the same period. The percentage decrease for total goods lifted between 2019 and 2020 was driven by a decrease in both goods imported and exported, with imports falling by 17%, and exports falling by 20%.

Impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) on quarterly data trends

Chart 2: Trends in goods lifted by UK-registered HGVs, 2004 Q4 to 2020 Q4 [[Table RFS0201](#)]



- ▶ The number of goods lifted in April - June 2020 was substantially lower than usual freight levels (falling more than two standard deviations below the 2015-19 average, as shown in Chart 3). This was during the period when restrictions were first implemented to limit the impact and transmission of COVID-19.
- ▶ The following quarters saw some recovery, with the levels seen in the periods of July - September 2020 and October - December 2020 more in line with variations seen before the pandemic (between one and two standard deviations below the 2015-19 average). This recovery coincided with the easing of lockdown restrictions.
- ▶ Total goods lifted remained stable into October - December 2020 with a 1% decrease compared to the previous quarter. During this period there was a rise in imports and a fall in exports. This period preceded the end of the EU exit transition period, as well as a second lockdown and the closure of the France-UK border that stopped all accompanied freight from the UK entering France for 48 hours.
- ▶ Caution should be taken when comparing these data to previous time periods. Previously announced timings of the UK leaving the EU, the subsequent transition period, and the coronavirus pandemic have all caused higher levels of volatility in freight statistics over the past two years.

Chart 3: Goods lifted by UK-registered HGVs, shown with expected variation from the average, 2015 Q4 to 2020 Q4

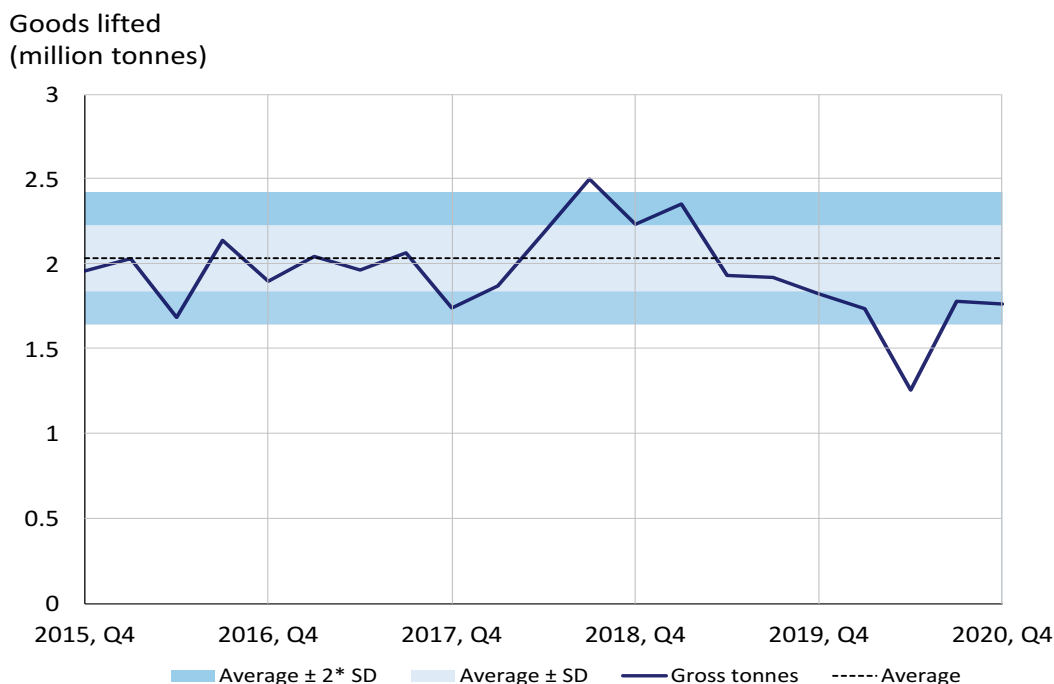


Chart 3 illustrates the amount of goods lifted internationally by UK registered HGVs between 2015 and 2020, as well as the expected variance from the 2015 – 2019 average. The number of goods lifted has been within two standard deviations of the mean for all quarters except for April - June (quarter 2) 2020, which saw the largest decrease since this data collection began in 1993.

Impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) on data collection

The statistics in this release are collected using the International Road Haulage Survey (IRHS) which measures the international activity of UK registered HGVs. Road freight data was collected without interruption during 2020, however the response rate overall was lower than in previous years. Data was collected in the same way as previous years, with 80% of surveys receiving responses in 2020 compared to 89% in 2019.

The methodology used for road freight statistics is designed to accommodate varying response rates. However, the lower response rate does increase the uncertainty about the road freight statistics in this publication. See the [Road Freight Statistics methodology note](#) for more information.

Additional sources of information regarding the impact of COVID-19

Road freight data in 2020 is consistent with the trends observed in the related statistical series shown below. More information is available at these links.



[Port and domestic waterborne freight statistics](#)



[ONS trade data](#)



[UK trade in goods statistics](#)

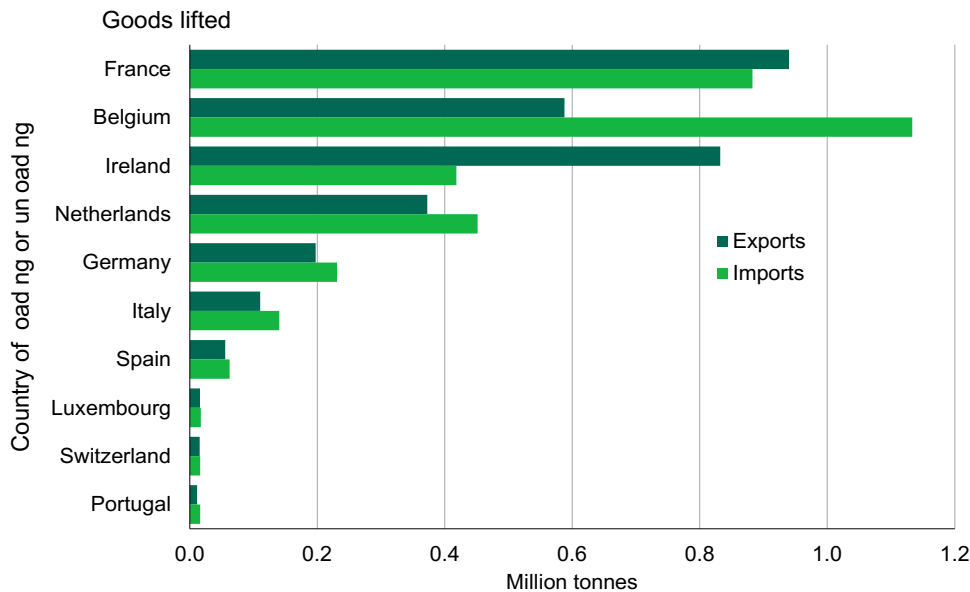


[Road goods vehicles travelling to Europe \(RORO\)](#)

Country of Trade

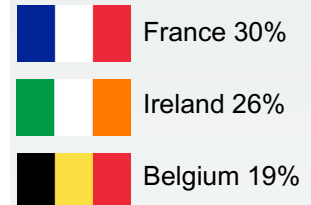
In 2020 around 93% of the tonnage exported from the UK in UK-registered vehicles was unloaded in one of five countries: France (30%), Irish Republic (26%), Belgium (19%), the Netherlands (12%) and Germany (6%). The same five countries also represented the origin of 92% of imported goods. As shown in chart below.

Chart 4: Goods lifted by UK-registered HGVs by country of loading or unloading, 2020 [Tables RFS0202 and RFS0203]

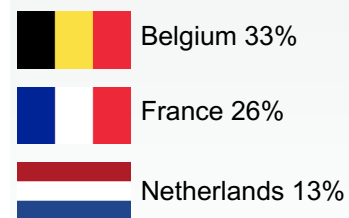


Goods lifted in 2020, origin and destination:

Exports from the UK to



Imports to the UK from



Commodities carried by UK-registered HGVs

The most common single category of commodity exported by UK vehicles in 2020 was groupage (22%) closely followed by food products (20%) and then by machinery and equipment (12%). The main commodities imported were food products (35%), followed by groupage (18%) and chemical products (6%). Unidentified and unclassified goods accounted for around 3% of exports and 2% of imports. (Table RFS0206)

Top 5 commodity types lifted by UK registered HGVs

		Exported from the UK (Million tonnes)	Imported to the UK (Million tonnes)
1	 Food products, including beverages and tobacco	0.65	1.20
2	 Groupage	0.68	0.63
3	 Machinery and equipment	0.37	0.23
4	 Agricultural products	0.27	0.17
5	 Chemical products	0.21	0.21

Definitions

Origin/destination:

Some HGV trips may be part of a multi-modal or multi-stage journey. The final origin/destination of the HGV road element may therefore not be the ultimate origin/destination of the goods.

Commodity:

goods are classified into commodity types and sub-categories by the 'standard goods classification for transport statistics 2007' NST2007.

Groupage: when, for mixed consignments, no single commodity makes up 75% or more of the consignment weight.

Goods vehicles travelling to Europe

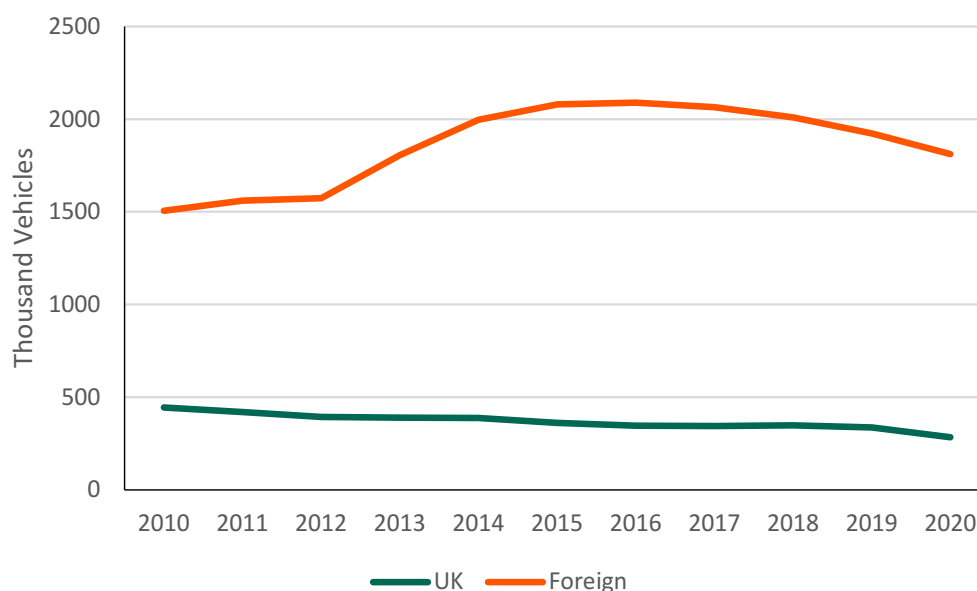
The total number of goods vehicles (both powered vehicles and unaccompanied trailers) travelling to Europe from Great Britain in 2020 was 3.21 million, down by 5% from the 3.37 million in 2019 ([Table RORO0101](#)).

For powered vehicles: The number of UK-registered vehicles travelling to Europe was 284 thousand (15% lower than the 336 thousand vehicles in 2019), whilst the number of foreign-registered vehicles was 1,812 thousand (a fall of 6% on the 2019 figure of 1,923 thousand) (Chart 5).

Compared with 10 years ago, the total number of powered goods vehicles travelling to Europe from GB has increased by 9%; within which foreign-registered vehicles have increased by 20% whilst the number of UK-registered vehicles has decreased by 36%.

Of the foreign-registered powered vehicles travelling to Europe from GB in 2020, the most common (461 thousand) were Polish-registered, followed by vehicles registered in Romania (223 thousand), the Netherlands (156 thousand), Spain (131 thousand) and Germany (102 thousand) ([Table RORO0201](#)).

Chart 5: UK and foreign registered powered goods vehicles travelling to Europe from GB, 2010-2020 [[Table RORO0101](#)]



Definitions

Powered vehicles:

comprise of rigid vehicles, lorries with semi-trailers (articulated units) and lorries with drawbar trailers (some vehicles under 3.5 tonnes gross vehicle weight are also included)



Unaccompanied trailers:

comprise of trailers and semi-trailers not accompanied on the ferry by a powered unit.

Unaccompanied trailers



Detailed statistics...

on goods vehicles travelling from GB to Europe can be sourced from [roll-on, roll-off international freight statistics](#), [Department for Transport](#).

Change of scope: The scope of the RoRo series was expanded from 2004 to cover vehicles travelling to all European destinations and now includes activity in the Irish Sea port group.

Goods vehicle operator licences

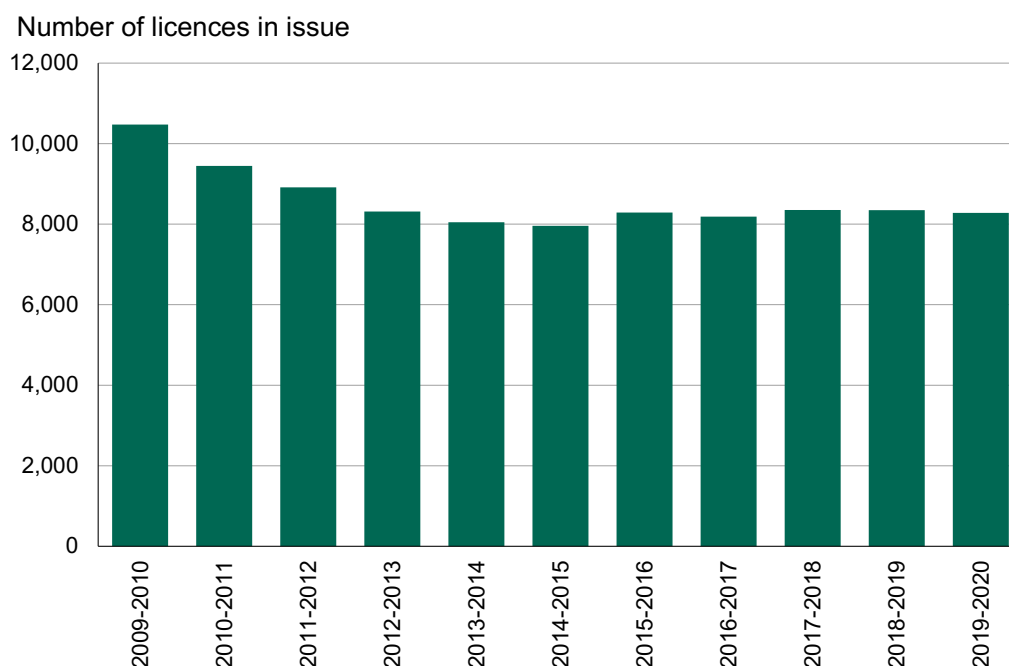
The number of firms using an HGV Standard International (SI) Operator Licence in Great Britain decreased by 1% from 8,348 in 2018-19 to 8,281 in 2019-20. This fall follows a smaller than 1% increase the previous year and the picture across the regions was mixed.

The number of licences in 2019-20 is 21% below that seen a decade ago in 2009-10 when just over 10 thousand licences were in issue (Chart 6).

The highest number of licences issued were in the Eastern region of GB, 1,949 in 2019-20, unchanged from the number in issue in 2018-19. The large number of licences issued in the Eastern region maybe due in part to the proximity to port links to European destinations and generally higher levels of freight activity in this area (Tables [RFS0121](#))

The total number of vehicles covered by SI licences decreased from 83,572 in 2018-19 to 80,200 in 2019-20. The average size of operators' vehicle fleet has increased from 7.7 vehicles in 2009-10 to 9.7 vehicles in 2019-20. This means fewer licences are in issue than 10 years ago (2009-10) but more vehicles are being specified under these licences. The same trend can be seen for domestic licences.

Chart 6: Standard International Licences in issue, Great Britain, 2009-2010 to 2019-2020 [[Traffic Commissioner's Annual Report](#)]



Definitions

UK hauliers must obtain a Standard International Operator's Licence to carry goods for others, for hire or reward, within the UK and on international journeys. This applies to all vehicles with a gross vehicle weight rating above 3.5 tonnes, though not all firms with a standard international licence will necessarily do international trips.

Change in Standard International licences in issue between 2019 and 2020

↓ 1% decrease in number of SI licences in issue

↓ 4% decrease in number of vehicles specified under SI licences

Detailed statistics...

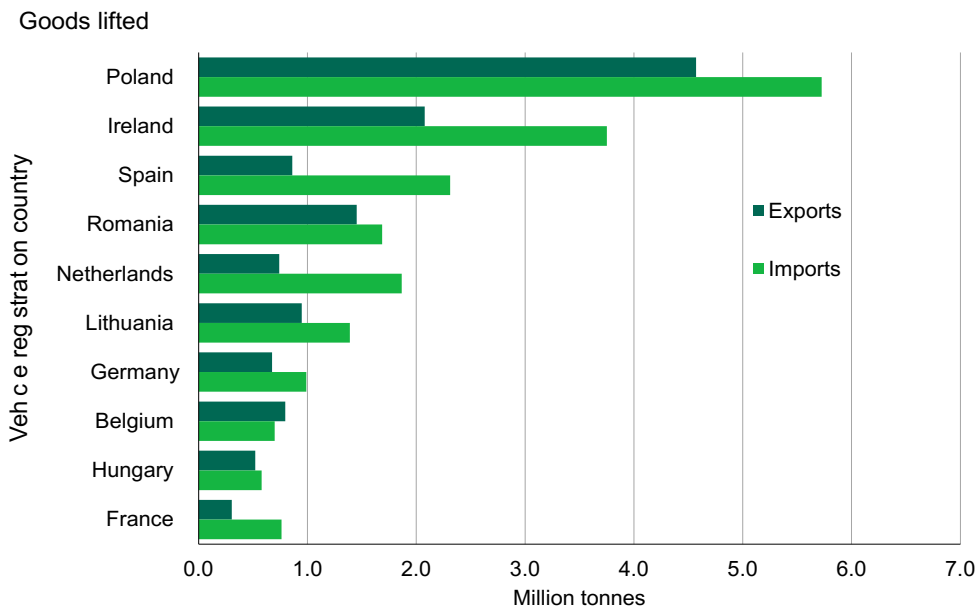
on the number of operator licences, broken down by issuing office, can be found within the [Traffic Commissioner's Annual Reports](#).

Data for 2020-2021 were not available at the time of producing this publication.

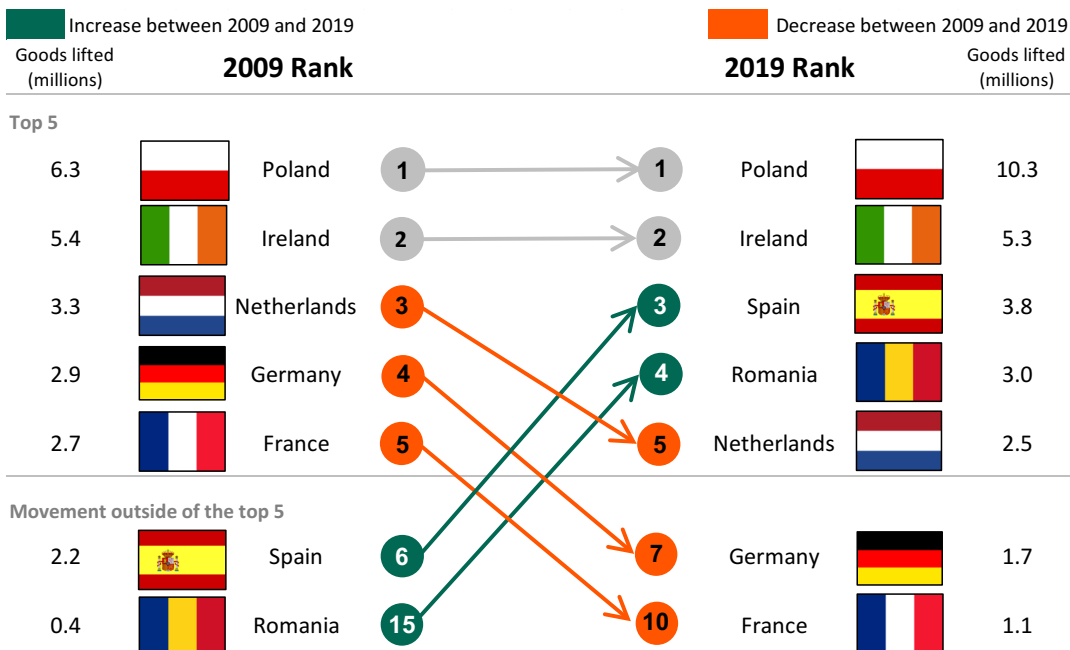
Road haulage by foreign-registered HGVs in the UK - 2019

In 2019, 36.6 million tonnes of goods were lifted to and from the UK by foreign-registered HGVs, an increase of 2% on 2018. Since 2009, Polish HGVs have lifted the largest tonnage of goods to and from the UK in total of all the EU27 countries, lifting 10.2 million tonnes in 2019. Prior to this, between 2002 and 2008, Irish HGVs carried the largest total weight of goods into or out of the UK, mostly across the Irish land boundary between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Irish vehicles continued to carry significant quantities in 2019, as did Spanish, Romanian, Dutch and Lithuanian HGVs.

Chart 7: Goods imported to and exported from the UK by foreign-registered HGVs: by vehicle registration country, 2019 [Tables [RFS0208](#) and [RFS0209](#)]



Total goods imported to or exported from the UK by foreign-registered HGVs - Ten year comparison



Detailed statistics...

on the activity of foreign registered HGVs can be obtained from the [Eurostat Transport Database](#).

Eurostat data for 2020 were not available at the time of producing this publication.

Definitions

EU15: refers to the European Union member states as of January 1995.

These consist of Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and United Kingdom.

EU27: refers to the 27 member states of the European Union after the United Kingdom left the European Union in January 2020.

These consist of the EU15 excluding the UK, plus Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

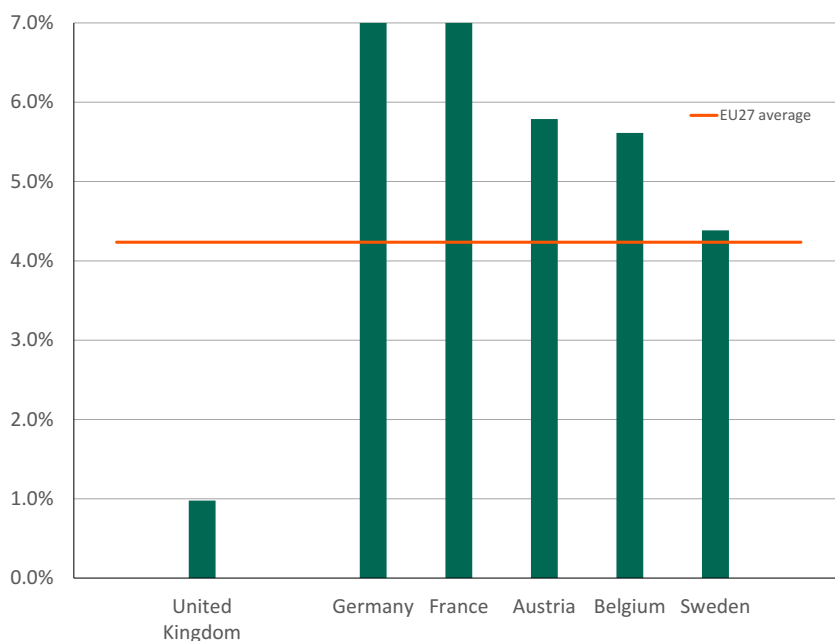
Cabotage within the UK by foreign-registered HGVs - 2019

In 2019, the overall level of **cabotage goods moved** in the UK was 1.5 billion tonne kilometres, 1% of all HGV activity within the UK (153.8 billion tonne kilometres).

In terms of **goods moved**, the major participants carrying out cabotage in the UK were vehicles from Poland, Romania and Ireland. These three countries accounted for 46% of cabotage in the UK.

The level of cabotage within the UK at 1.0% is below the EU27 average penetration rate of 4.2%. Levels of cabotage are highest in Germany, France and Austria where rates are 8.0%, 7.0% and 5.8% respectively.

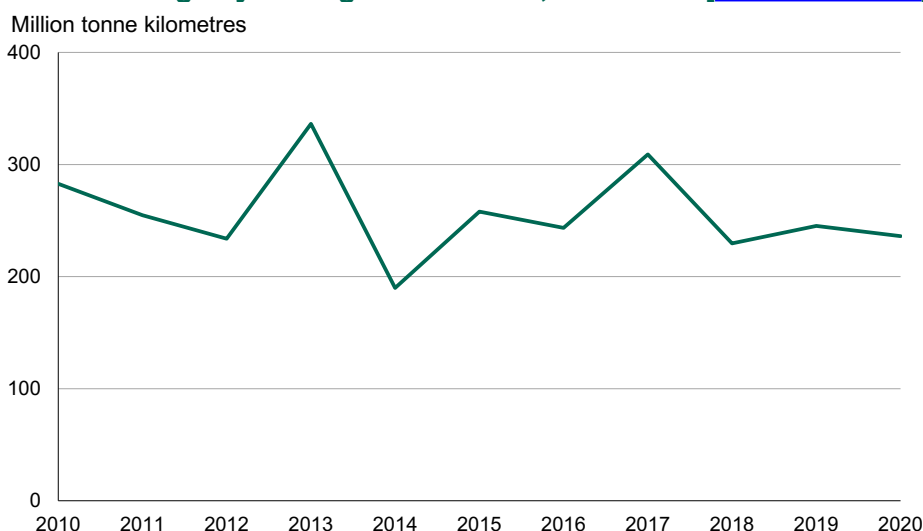
Chart 8: Cabotage penetration rates, 2019 [Table RFS0216]



Cabotage within the EU by UK registered HGVs

UK HGVs undertook 236 million tonne kilometres of cabotage in foreign countries in 2020, up from 246 million tonne kilometres in 2019.

Chart 9: Cabotage by UK registered HGVs, 2010-2020 [Table RFS0130]



Definitions

Cabotage: measured in tonne kilometres, refers to road haulage solely within one country by a vehicle registered in another country.

Penetration rate: defined as cabotage (in tonne kilometres) as a proportion of the sum of domestic and cabotage tonne kilometres

Detailed statistics...

on the activity of foreign registered HGVs can be obtained from the [Eurostat Transport Database](#).

Eurostat data for 2020 were not available at the time of producing this publication.

Information on cabotage in the UK by vehicle registration country can be sourced in [Table RFS0212](#)

Note: Cabotage by UK vehicles in the EU is measured using data from the International Road Haulage Survey only. This differs from the measure of cabotage within the UK by foreign vehicles which is calculated using data from Eurostat. At the time of publication the most recent Eurostat data was 2019.

Users and uses of statistics

Road freight statistics are a key source of management information on the use of the country's infrastructure. The main use occurs across various types of public and private bodies: local and central government, such as the Office for National Statistics and Highways England; local town and transport planning bodies; commercial organisations, such as haulage operators and transport consultants, and academics.

Users are mainly interested in information such as the length of haul, empty running, the pattern of freight from abroad on UK roads. The statistics also support policies on freight, road safety and reducing congestion and pollution.

Strengths and weaknesses of data

The figures in this release are derived from the International Road Haulage Survey (IRHS) which collects information on HGVs registered in Great Britain making international trips. Excluded from the survey are HGVs registered in Northern Ireland, foreign-registered vehicles and vehicles of 3.5 tonnes or less gross vehicle weight (Light Goods Vehicles).

The IRHS is a continuous survey which collects a range of information on freight movements from a sample of approximately 3,600 firms holding a standard international HGV licence. These licences are issued by the eight regional Traffic Commissioner Offices (TCO) and data are provided to the DfT by the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA).

Figures are weighted to be representative of the volume of HGV traffic travelling from GB to mainland Europe using ferry routes and the Channel Tunnel. This information is collected from returns provided by the roll-on / roll-off ferry operators (RORO), giving the number of powered vehicles and unaccompanied trailers carried on each route from GB to mainland Europe, and from monthly information supplied by Eurotunnel.

The use of RORO data to weight the IRHS data may introduce a small bias due to the fact that this information is collected on outward traffic only. This will affect the weighting of vehicles which return to the UK using a route different than that for the outward journey. RORO data is also only able to disaggregate between UK and foreign vehicles. An assumption is therefore made on the proportion of UK vehicles which are registered in Northern Ireland to obtain an estimate of GB registered vehicles.

Between 2011 and 2012, a number of changes were made to how the three DfT road freight surveys were processed. Caution should therefore be used for statistics based on the three freight surveys when making comparisons over time. See the [Road Freight Statistics methodology note](#) for more information.

This release and its contents partly rely on the use of administrative data from DVLA and DVSA. DfT have assessed the impact of this on the quality of these statistics, a report on which can be found in the [Quality assurance of administrative data sources: Driver Vehicle Licensing Agency](#) and [Quality assurance of administrative data sources: Driver Vehicle Standards Agency](#).

Guidance on the methods used to compile these statistics and further information can be found in the [Road Freight Statistics notes and definitions](#).

Background Notes

These statistics were [confirmed as National Statistics in December 2016](#). The data tables give further detail on the key results presented in this statistical release and statistics on other road freight topics, including the domestic activity of UK-registered HGVs. These data tables are available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/road-freight-domestic-and-international-statistics>

This release also collates statistics from a number of published sources that are revised and updated throughout the year. The data for this release were extracted in June 2021, and users can refer to the links overleaf for the most recent or revised data available for each of the sources used, and also caveats relating to the sources.

1. The web tables give further detail on the key results presented in this statistical release and statistics on other road freight topics, including domestic activity of GB-registered HGVs. They are available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/road-freight-domestic-and-international-statistics>
2. The statistics on vehicles travelling to mainland Europe are available on the 'Roll on roll off International Freight' webpages via <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/road-freight-domestic-and-international-statistics>
3. The statistics on road freight undertaken by foreign-registered vehicles have been taken from the Eurostat Transport database at <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>
4. Guidance on the methods used to compile these statistics and further background information can be found in the Road Freight Statistics [Notes and Definitions](#).
5. Details of ministers and officials who receive pre-release access to these statistics up to 24 hours before release can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/road-freight-statistics-pre-release-access-list>
6. The next annual Road Freight Statistics release will be published in the Summer of 2022. It will contain statistics for 2021.



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