

# Northern Ireland Ports Traffic 2021

24 August 2022

Geographical Area: Northern Ireland  
Theme: Business  
Frequency: Annual

## Introduction

The Northern Ireland Ports Traffic is an analysis of the Department for Transport's UK Port Freight Statistics, at a Northern Ireland level. It provides statistics on the volume and tonnage of traffic at Northern Ireland ports.

## Key points

- The total tonnage through Northern Ireland (NI) ports in 2021 was 29.5 million tonnes<sup>1</sup>, an increase of 9.0% compared to 27.1 million tonnes the previous year. Total freight traffic through United Kingdom (UK) ports in 2021 was 445.5 million tonnes, compared to 438.9 million tonnes the previous year, an increase of 1.5%.
- Over the year in NI, the total tonnage of inward traffic increased by 5.7% to 17.2 million tonnes, and outward traffic increased by 14.0% to 12.3 million tonnes. For the UK as a whole, the volume of inward traffic for 2021 increased by 4.5% to 291.2 million tonnes and outward traffic decreased by 3.8% to 153.4 million tonnes.
- The majority of total NI traffic came through the Belfast Port (67.3%), while Warrenpoint accounted for the second highest level of total traffic (12.2%), followed by 10.8% through the Port of Larne. The most popular UK port was London, which handled 11.6% of total UK port traffic in 2021.
- A total of 948,933 road goods vehicles passed through Northern Ireland ports in 2021 – an increase of 13.1% from 839,071 in 2020. In total, 7.0 million road goods vehicles passed through the UK in 2021 – an increase of 0.1% from 2020.
- A total of 532,611 non-freight vehicles passed through Northern Ireland ports in 2021. This compared with a figure of 296,094 in 2020 – an increase of 79.9%. In total, 2.4 million non-freight vehicles passed through the UK in 2021 – an increase of 17.7% from 2020.

<sup>1</sup> Please note that this figure includes all major and minor ports, see [Table 1 on NI Ports Traffic](#)

## Context

The Department for Transport (DfT) collects and publishes statistics about passenger and freight traffic through the ports of the UK.

The importance of shipping and trade to the economy of the UK, an island nation, has resulted in the establishment of a large number of ports around the coast, which are very diverse in terms of size and type of cargo handled. Around 95 per cent by volume of the UK's international trade is transported by sea, and, at least until recently, the UK port sector handled a greater weight of goods than any other in Europe.

Statistics on UK port traffic (2021) are available on the DfT Statistics website:

[UK Port Freight Statistics 2021](#)

Following publication of the detailed final annual release by DfT, statisticians within the Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency analyse the data which relate to Northern Ireland ports and release this information as the 'Northern Ireland Ports Traffic' publication in September each year.

This Northern Ireland Ports Traffic publication provides statistics on passenger and freight traffic through Northern Ireland ports. Full details including information on quality and methodology can be found in the Ports Traffic section of the NISRA website:

[NI Ports Traffic](#)

This release includes information on non-freight traffic through NI Ports and is based on already published data. For information on external visitors to NI please see:

[Annual Tourism Statistics 2019](#)

# Contents

<b>Northern Ireland Ports Traffic 2021</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>1 Goods through principal ports</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>2 Road goods vehicles through principal ports</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>3 Non-freight vehicles through principal ports</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>4 Lift on-Lift off (Lo-Lo) traffic through principal ports</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>5 Further information</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>6 Index of tables</b> .....	<b>15</b>

## National Statistics

The United Kingdom Statistics Authority has designated these statistics as National Statistics, in accordance with the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and signifying compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

National Statistics status means that official statistics meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and public value.

All official statistics should comply with all aspects of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. They are awarded National Statistics status following an assessment by the Authority's regulatory arm. The Authority considers whether the statistics meet the highest standards of Code compliance, including the value they add to public decisions and debate.

It is a producer's responsibility to maintain compliance with the standards expected of National Statistics. If we become concerned about whether these statistics are still meeting the appropriate standards, we will discuss any concerns with the Authority promptly.

National Statistics status can be removed at any point when the highest standards are not maintained, and reinstated when standards are restored.

# 1 Goods through principal ports

**Inward traffic** refers to all goods taken into Northern Ireland from Great Britain and elsewhere through the Northern Ireland ports. Northern Ireland is not necessarily the ultimate destination for these goods.

**Outward traffic** covers all goods taken out through Northern Ireland ports, destined for Great Britain or for foreign countries. The origin of the goods is not necessarily in Northern Ireland.

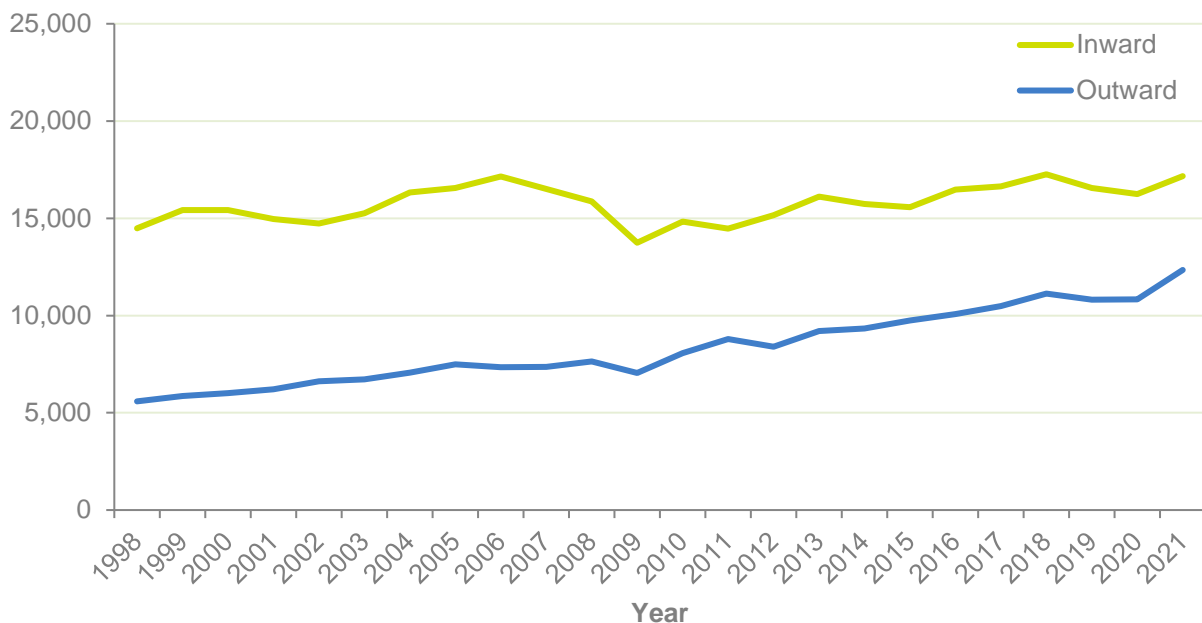
## Key points

- The **total tonnage** through Northern Ireland ports in 2021 was 29.5 million tonnes
- This represented an increase of 9.0% on the figure of 27.1 million tonnes for 2020
- In 2021, the majority of total NI traffic came through Belfast Port (67.3%)

**Figure 1: Total tonnage through NI Ports has been gradually increasing over the last 23 years**

**Total thousand tonnes for inward and outward traffic for Northern Ireland, 1998-2021**

Thousand tonnes



[Download in excel](#)

Figure 1 above shows that the total tonnage handled at Northern Ireland ports has been increasing over the last 23 years. Inward tonnage has slightly increased over the period, peaking in 2006 prior to the 2007 to 2009 recession, and generally increasing thereafter. Outward tonnage has seen a very strong growth over the last 23 years, from some 6.0 million tonnes in 2000 to 12.3 million tonnes in 2021 – the highest in the series (starting in 1998).

The **total tonnage** through Northern Ireland ports has exceeded 25 million tonnes of total traffic in each of the last nine years. In 2021 it amounted to 29.5 million tonnes, which:

- was the largest volume of tonnage moving through NI ports since the series began in 1998
- comprised 17.2 million tonnes of inward traffic and 12.3 million tonnes of outward traffic
- represented an increase of 9.0% on the figure of 27.1 million tonnes in 2020, which comprised 16.3 million tonnes of inward traffic and 10.8 million tonnes of outward traffic

Of all **NI ports** in 2021:

- the majority of total traffic came through the Belfast Port (67.3%), with the remainder coming through Warrenpoint (12.2%), Larne (10.8%), Londonderry (6.2%) and other minor ports (3.4%)
- the majority of inward traffic came through the Belfast Port (67.3%), with 10.2% through Warrenpoint, 10.0% through Londonderry, 9.8% through Larne and the remainder through other minor ports (2.8%)
- 67.3% of outward traffic went through the Belfast Port, with 15.1% through Warrenpoint, 12.3% through Larne and the remainder through Londonderry (1.0%) and other minor ports (4.4%)
- In 2021, Belfast remained the UK port that handles the most domestic traffic – 13.1 million tonnes. Domestic traffic comprises mostly cross channel traffic; the other major ports for domestic traffic are Liverpool (5.6 million tonnes), Larne (3.2 million tonnes), Cairnryan (3.1 million tonnes) and Warrenpoint (2.9 million tonnes).

In 2021, total freight traffic through **UK ports** was 445.5 million tonnes, which:

- was an increase of 1.5% on the figure in 2020 (438.9 million tonnes)
- was some 23.8% below the peak in the series in 2005 (584.5 million tonnes)
- comprised 291.8 million tonnes of inward traffic, an increase of 4.5% since 2020
- comprised 153.8 million tonnes of outward traffic, a decrease of 3.8% since 2020.

Of all **UK ports** in 2021:

- London was the UK's leading port, handling 51.8 million tonnes (11.6% of UK traffic), followed by Grimsby and Immingham with 50.0 million tonnes (11.2%), Liverpool with 34.5 million tonnes (7.7%) and Milford Haven with 30.3 million tonnes (6.8%).

Northern Ireland Ports data contained in this section can be found in Table 1 of the Northern Ireland Ports Traffic 2021 file on the [NISRA Ports Traffic](#) webpage.

UK Port Data contained in this section can be found in table port0101 of the Department for Transport's [Port Freight Annual Statistics: 2021 tables](#).

## 2 Road goods vehicles through principal ports

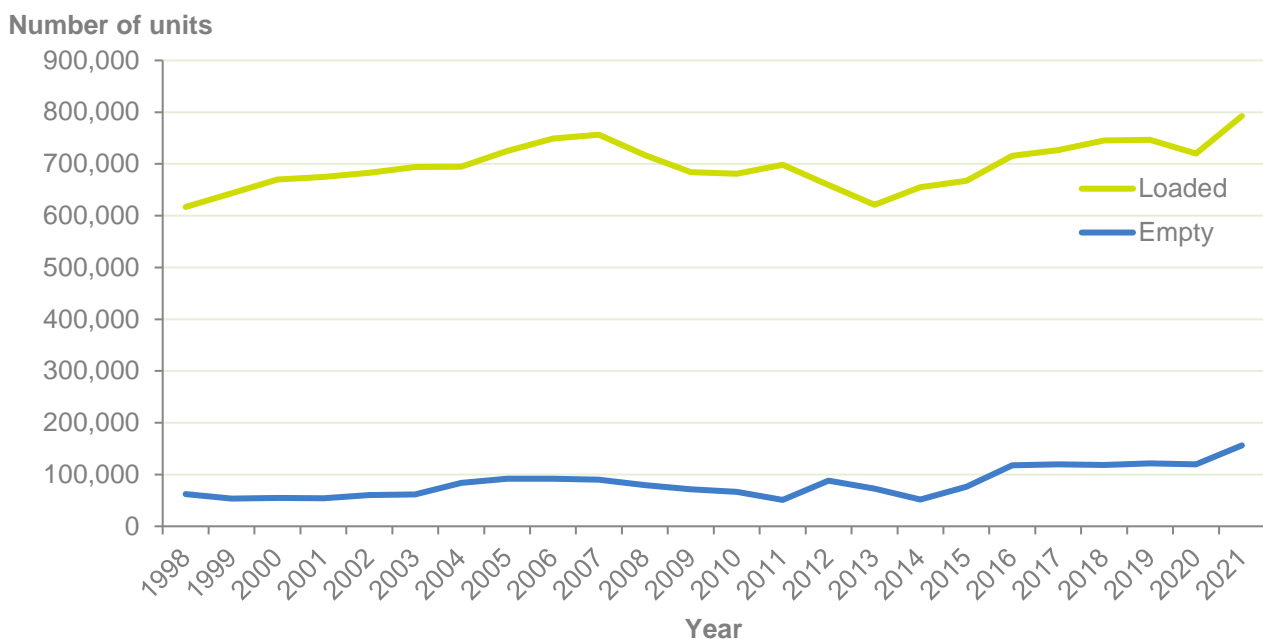
**Road goods vehicles** include road goods vehicles (with accompanying trailers) and unaccompanied road goods trailers.

### Key points

- Just under 0.95 million **road goods vehicles** passed through NI ports
- This is the highest number of road good vehicles since the start of the series (1998)
- Belfast accounted for 66% of this traffic
- Tonnage on outward road goods vehicles (6.9m tonnes) exceeded tonnage on inward road goods vehicles (6.7m tonnes) for the first time in the series (from 1998).

**Figure 2: Increase in the number of road goods vehicles at Northern Ireland ports over last 23 years**

### Road goods vehicles (units) - Northern Ireland, 1998-2021



[Download in excel](#)

Figure 2 above shows that the number of road goods vehicles passing through Northern Ireland ports has been increasing over the last 23 years. Total road goods vehicle units have increased by 39.7%, from 679,000 units in 1998 to 949,000 units in 2021, the highest in the series. Loaded road goods vehicles has increased by 28.5% over the 23 year period; and unloaded road goods vehicles have seen a very strong growth over the last 23 years, increasing by 151.2% from 62,000 units in 1998 to 156,000 units in 2021.

A total of 948,933 road goods vehicles passed through **Northern Ireland ports** in 2021, which:

- represented an increase of 13.1% on 2020 figures
- comprised 471,073 road goods vehicles arriving in NI and 477,860 leaving
- included 792,599 loaded and 156,334 empty road goods vehicles
- mostly passed through the Belfast Port (66.3%), with the remainder passing through the Port of Larne (21.8%) and Warrenpoint (11.8%)
- was 39.7% above the number of road goods vehicles passing through ports in 1998.

A total of 7.0 million road goods vehicles passed through **UK ports** in 2021, which:

- represented an increase of 0.1% on 2020 figures
- comprised 3.5 million road goods vehicles inward and 3.4 million outward
- passed in largest numbers through the Port of Dover, accounting for 2.1 million road goods vehicles or 30.8% of the total UK road goods vehicle traffic.

Northern Ireland Ports data contained in this section can be found in Table 2 and Table 2a of the Northern Ireland Ports Traffic 2021 file on the [NISRA Ports Traffic](#) webpage.

UK Port Data contained in this section can be found in table port0499 of the Department for Transport's [Port Freight Annual Statistics: 2021 tables](#).



# 3 Non-freight vehicles through principal ports

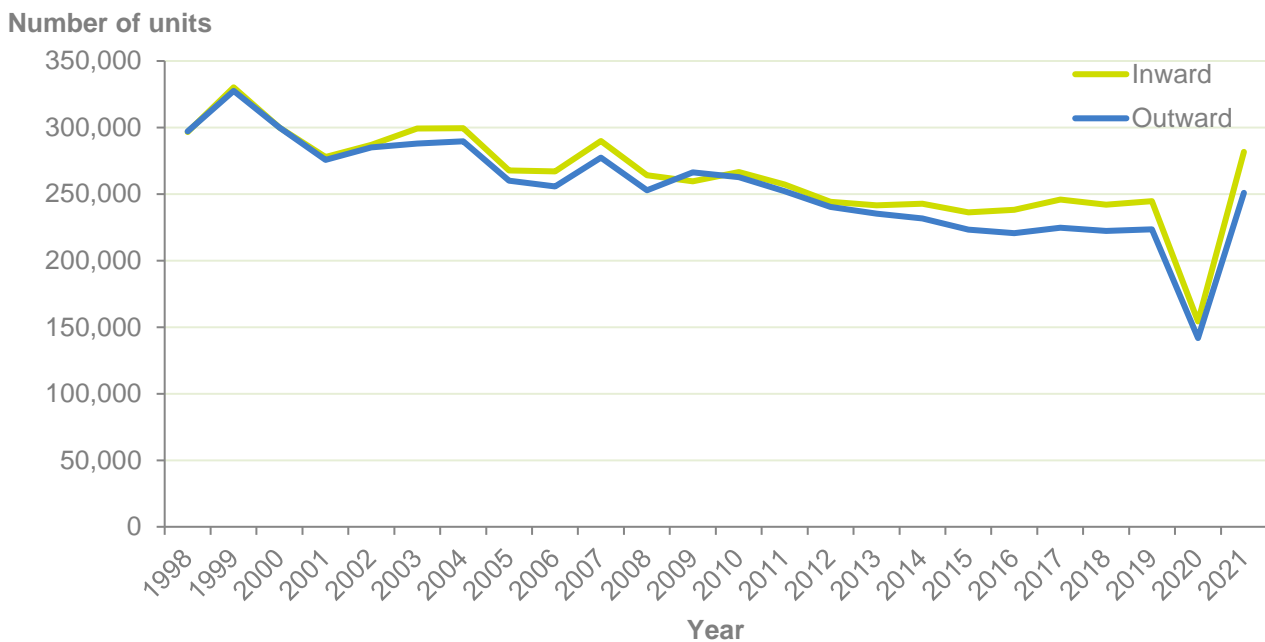
**Non-freight vehicles** include passenger cars, motorcycles and accompanying trailers or caravans and passenger buses.

### Key points

- Over 532,000 **non-freight vehicles** passed through NI ports
- Belfast accounted for 79.4% of the traffic

**Figure 3: Steady decline in non-freight vehicles through Northern Ireland ports over the last 23 years**

**Unit load carrier non-freight vehicles - Northern Ireland, 1998-2021**



[Download in excel](#)

Figure 3 above shows that there has been a steady decline in the number of non-freight vehicles passing through Northern Ireland ports over the last 20 years, with a similar declining trend in both the inward and outward flow of non-freight vehicles. Total non-freight vehicle units have decreased by 19.0% since 1999, which is the peak in the data series with 658,000 non-freight vehicles. During the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns and travel restrictions the number of non-freight vehicles passing through NI ports decreased to a series low of 296,000 units in 2020; however this has recovered to 533,000 units in 2021, and may have been boosted by the temporary ferry service operated by Stena Line between Belfast and Holyhead between the 18<sup>th</sup> June and 25<sup>th</sup> July 2021.

A total of 532,611 non-freight vehicles passed through **Northern Ireland ports** in 2021, which:

- represented an increase of 79.9% on 2020 figures
- comprised 281,686 vehicles arriving in NI and 250,925 leaving
- mostly passed through Belfast Port (79.4%), with the remainder passing through the Port of Larne (20.6%)
- was 19.0% below the number of non-freight vehicles passing through ports in 1999.

A total of 2.4 million non-freight vehicles passed through **UK ports** in 2021, which:

- represented an increase of 17.7% on 2020 figures
- comprised 1.2 million non-freight vehicles inward and 1.2 million outward
- passed in largest numbers through the Belfast Port, accounting for 0.4 million vehicles or 17.5% of the total UK non-freight vehicle traffic.

Northern Ireland Ports data contained in this section can be found in Table 3 of the Northern Ireland Ports Traffic 2021 file on the [NISRA Ports Traffic](#) webpage.

UK Port Data contained in this section can be found in table port0499 of the Department for Transport's [Port Freight Annual Statistics: 2021 tables](#).

# 4 Lift on-Lift off (Lo-Lo) traffic through principal ports

**Lift on-Lift off (Lo-Lo)** traffic refers to standard shipping containers that are lifted on or off ships.

**TEU (twenty-foot equivalent units)** is a standardised measure to allow for the different sizes of container boxes.

### Key points

- Over 277,000 TEUs of **container traffic** passed through Northern Ireland Ports in 2021
- This represents an increase of 16.9% on the 237,600 TEUs of container traffic in 2020
- Belfast accounted for 85.2% of TEUs container traffic

**Figure 4: Slight increase in the number of twenty-foot Equivalent Units (TEUs) traffic at Northern Ireland ports over last 20 years**

**Twenty-foot Equivalent Units (TEUs) traffic - Northern Ireland, 2000-2021**



[Download in excel](#)

Figure 4 above shows an increase in the number of twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) over the last 20 years, up 43.5% from 2000. There was steady growth in the number of TEUs from 2000 to 2007, followed by a decline until 2010. The number of TEUs in 2021 is now 24.6% above the value recorded in 2010.

A total of 277,646 TEU containers passed through **Northern Ireland ports** in 2021, which:

- represented an increase of 16.9% on 2020 figures
- comprised 139,185 TEUs inward and 138,461 outward
- mostly passed through the Belfast Port (85.2%), with the remainder passing through Warrenpoint (14.8%)
- was 43.5% above the number of TEU containers passing through NI ports in 2000.

A total of 10.4 million TEU containers passed through **UK ports** in 2021, which:

- was an increase of 6.5% on 2020 figures
- comprised 5.3 million TEUs inward and 5.1 million outward<sup>1</sup>
- passed in largest numbers through Felixstowe, accounting for 3.6 million TEUs or 35.0% of the total UK TEUs traffic.

Northern Ireland Ports data contained in this section can be found in Table 4 of the Northern Ireland Ports Traffic 2021 file on the [NISRA Ports Traffic](#) webpage.

UK Port Data contained in this section can be found in table port0499 of the Department for Transport's [Port Freight Annual Statistics: 2021 tables](#).

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<sup>1</sup> Figures do not sum due to rounding

## 5 Further information

Port freight traffic statistics are based on a combination of data reported to the DfT by port authorities and shipping lines or their agents. Prior to 2000, reporting was by port authorities only.

Information is required quarterly on foreign and domestic tonnages and freight units, for major ports (i.e. those that have over one million tonnes of freight per annum or are strategically important), by route, ship and cargo type. Much less information is required for smaller ports. Route and ship information is collected from shipping lines, operators and shipping agents, because it is only generally available from them. The ports supply total tonnage and units quarterly and cargo type annually, which is used to provide control totals and also to publish more timely provisional results.

A technical note, published by the Department for Transport, provides further information on the current and previous data collection systems, and explains the methods and quality standards implemented in the DfT Port Freight Statistics publication, and the Northern Ireland Ports Traffic publication. It is available at:

[DfT Port Freight Statistics notes and definitions](#)

## Contact information

If you require further information about the figures contained in this publication or the accompanying tables, please contact:

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Web: [Ports traffic](#)

The next Northern Ireland Ports Traffic bulletin, including estimates for 2022, will be published in autumn 2023.

The Department for Transport will publish the Port Freight Quarterly Statistics: April to June in September 2022; the Northern Ireland Quarterly Ports Traffic April to June 2022 will be published in Autumn 2022.

## 6 Index of tables

Northern Ireland Ports data (1998-2021) contained in this report can be found in the tables contained in the Northern Ireland Ports Traffic 2021 file on the [NISRA Ports Traffic](#) webpage. These include:

Table 1: Tonnage of goods through the principal ports in Northern Ireland

Table 2a: Number of road goods vehicles through the principal ports in Northern Ireland

Table 2b: Tonnage of goods on road goods vehicles through the principal ports in Northern Ireland

Table 3: Number of non-freight vehicles through the principal ports in Northern Ireland

Table 4: Number of twenty-foot equivalent units through the principal ports in Northern Ireland

UK Port Data contained in this section can be found in the tables of the Department for Transport's [Port Freight Annual Statistics: 2021 tables](#).

The following additional tables containing Northern Ireland Ports Traffic data for 1998-2021 can be found on the website:

[Table 1 - Tonnage of goods through the principal ports in Northern Ireland](#)

[Table 2 - Unit load carrier cross channel traffic](#)

[Table 3 - Unit load carrier foreign traffic](#)

[Table 4 - Unit load carrier total traffic](#)

[Table 5 - Other traffic \(cross channel, foreign and total\)](#)

[Table 6 - Unit load carrier traffic non-freight vehicles](#)

### Notes and definitions:

Tables 1-5 give tonnage of goods through the ports and exclude weights of containers and weights of materials shipped for dumping at sea.

### Inward traffic

Inward traffic refers to all goods taken into Northern Ireland from Great Britain and elsewhere through the Northern Ireland ports. Northern Ireland is not necessarily the ultimate destination for these goods.

**Outward traffic**

Outward traffic covers all goods taken out through Northern Ireland ports, destined for Great Britain or for foreign countries. The origin of the goods is not necessarily in Northern Ireland.

**Tonnage**

The weight of goods transported, including crates and other packaging.

**Road goods vehicles**

Road goods vehicles include road goods vehicles (with accompanying trailers) and unaccompanied road goods trailers.

**Non-freight vehicles**

Non-freight vehicles include passenger cars, motorcycles and accompanying trailers / caravans and passenger buses.

**Lift on-Lift off (Lo-Lo) traffic**

Lift on-Lift off (Lo-Lo) refers to standard shipping containers that are lifted on or off ships.

**TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units)**

This is a standardised measure to allow for the different sizes of container boxes.

Size	TEU
20ft	1
40ft	2
>20ft & <40ft	1.5
>40ft	2.25



## Northern Ireland Major Ports Traffic Data

The microdata for Northern Ireland Ports Traffic provides data from 2000-2021 and can be found on the website:

[Northern Ireland Major Ports Traffic Data 2021](#)

The file contains a number of pivot tables that have been generated using the different variables available for the NI Major Ports Traffic data. These pivot tables can then be further manipulated by selecting the variables that are of interest and / or the particular elements of these variables that are of interest.

More information and a demonstration can be found on the 'User Guide' tab of the data file.

The variables included in the data set are:

**Year:** calendar year data from 2000 to 2021

**Major Port:** the name of the Northern Ireland Major Port (excludes any minor ports)

**Region:** Regions of the world NI Major Port freight is with

**Country:** Country of the world NI Major Port freight is with

**Direction:** Direction of port traffic (inwards or outwards)

**Cargo Group:** Cargo category based on the means by which goods are loaded onto or off of the vessel

**Cargo Category:** Numerical classification of port freight traffic for the EC Directive on statistical returns in respect of the carriage of goods and passengers by sea

**Cargo Description:** Matching description for cargo category

**Tonnage (thousands):** Weight of cargo in tonnes (thousands). Ro-Ro tonnage does not include the weight of the vehicle itself, only the cargo. No tonnage is recorded for passenger vehicles

**Loaded Units (thousands):** The number of loaded units (thousands) handled for each category

**Empty Units (thousands):** The number of empty units (thousands) handled for each category

**Total Units (thousands):** The total number of units (thousands) handled for each category (Loaded and Empty)

**TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units):** This is a standardised measure to allow for the different sizes of container boxes