Northern Ireland Ports Traffic 2023

28 November 2024

Geographical Area: Northern Ireland
Theme: Business
Frequency: Annual

Introduction

The Northern Ireland (NI) 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 ports in 2023 was 27.8 million tonnes[1], a decrease of 0.4% from the previous year. Total freight traffic through United Kingdom (UK) ports in 2023 was 434.9 million tonnes, compared to 459.0 million tonnes the previous year, a decrease of 5.3%.

- Over the year in NI, the total tonnage of inward traffic decreased by 1.1% to 16.3 million tonnes, and outward traffic increased by 0.5% to 11.5 million tonnes. For the UK as a whole, the volume of inward traffic for 2023 decreased by 4.7% to 290.0 million tonnes and outward traffic decreased by 6.3% to 144.9 million tonnes.

- The majority of total NI traffic came through Belfast Port (66.3%), while Port of Larne accounted for the second highest level of total traffic (13.9%), followed by 11.3% through Warrenpoint. The most popular UK port was London, which handled 11.9% of total UK port traffic in 2023.

- A total of 917,437 road goods vehicles passed through Northern Ireland ports in 2023 – an increase of 1.8% from 901,270 in 2022. In total, 6.9 million road goods vehicles passed through the UK in 2023 – an increase of 0.3% from 2022.

- A total of 570,114 non-freight vehicles passed through Northern Ireland ports in 2023. This compared with a figure of 583,331 in 2022 – a decrease of 2.3%. In total, 5.1 million non-freight vehicles passed through the UK in 2023 – an increase of 9.3% from 2022.

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[1] 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 (2023) are available on the DfT Statistics website:
[UK Port Freight Statistics 2023.](#)

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

Following NISRA's **consultation** on changes to statistical outputs, the quarterly statistical bulletin has been suspended until further notice. The data in this output will continue to be available on the [Department for Transport website](#).

This Northern Ireland Ports Traffic annual 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.](#)

Information relating to estimates of the cargo group breakdowns can be found in the new [NISRA Data Portal.](#)

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 2023.](#)

Contents

Accredited Official Statistics

Accredited official statistics are a sub-set of official statistics that have been independently reviewed by the Office for Statistics Regulation and confirmed as complying with the standards of trustworthiness, quality, and value in the **Code of Practice for Statistics**. Accredited official statistics are called National Statistics in the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007.

These official statistics were independently reviewed by the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) in December 2018. They comply with the standards of trustworthiness, quality and value in the Code of Practice for Statistics and should be labelled 'accredited official statistics'.

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 2023 was 27.8 million tonnes.
- This represented a decrease of 0.4% on the figure of 27.9 million tonnes for 2022.
- In 2023, the majority of total NI traffic came through Belfast Port (66.3%).

Figure 1: Total tonnage through NI Ports has been gradually increasing over the last 25 years

Total thousand tonnes for inward and outward traffic for Northern Ireland, 1998-2023

Thousand tonnes
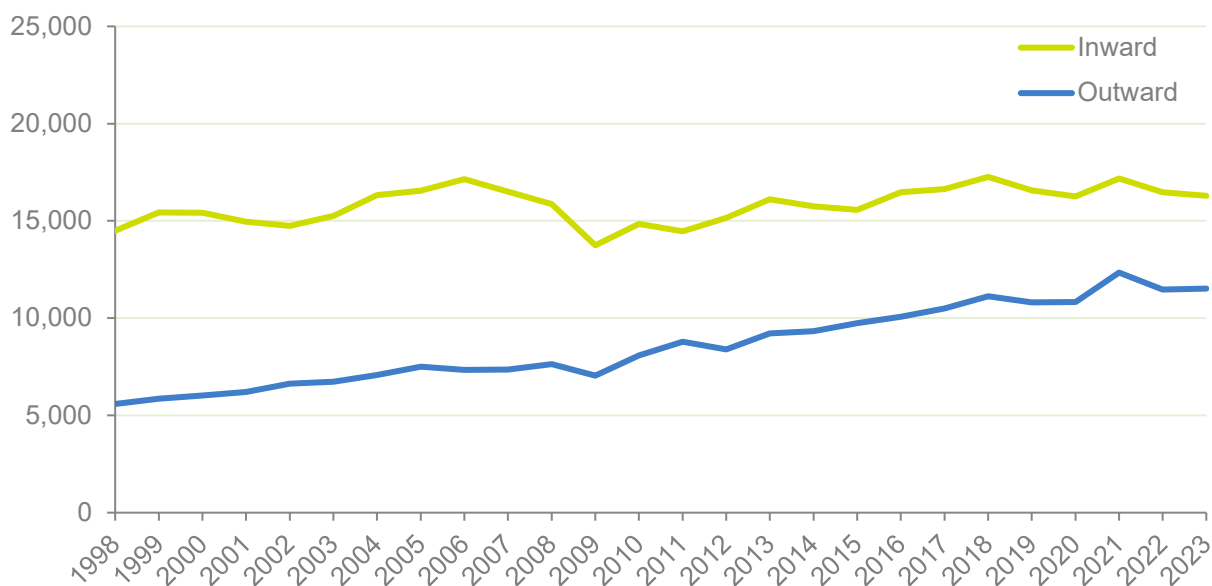
Download in excel

Figure 1 above shows that the total tonnage handled at Northern Ireland ports has been increasing over the last 25 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 25 years, from some 6.0 million tonnes in 2000 to 12.3 million tonnes in 2021 – the highest in the series (starting in 1998); then slightly falling to 11.5 million tonnes in 2022/23.

The **total tonnage** through Northern Ireland ports has exceeded 25 million tonnes of total traffic in each of the last eleven years. In 2023 it amounted to 27.8 million tonnes, which:

- comprised 16.3 million tonnes of inward traffic and 11.5 million tonnes of outward traffic.

- represented a decrease of 0.4% on the figure of 27.9 million tonnes in 2022, which comprised 16.5 million tonnes of inward traffic and 11.5 million tonnes of outward traffic.

Of all **NI ports** in 2023:

- the majority of total traffic came through Belfast Port (66.3%), with the remainder coming through the Port of Larne (13.9%), Warrenpoint (11.3%), Londonderry (6.5%) and other minor ports (2.0%).

- the majority of inward traffic came through Belfast Port (66.4%), with 12.8% through the Port of Larne, 10.7% through Londonderry, 9.4% through Warrenpoint and the remainder through other minor ports (0.8%).

- 66.1% of outward traffic went through Belfast Port, with 15.4% through the Port of Larne, 14.1% through Warrenpoint and the remainder through Londonderry (0.7%) and other minor ports (3.7%).

- In 2023, Belfast remained the UK port that handles the most domestic cross channel traffic – 12.2 million tonnes. Domestic traffic comprises mostly cross channel traffic; the other major ports for cross channel traffic are, Liverpool (5.3 million tonnes), Larne (3.8 million tonnes), Cairnryan (3.8 million tonnes) and Warrenpoint (2.5 million tonnes).

In 2023, total freight traffic through **UK ports** was 434.9 million tonnes, which:

- was a decrease of 5.3% on the figure in 2022 (459.0 million tonnes)
- was 25.6% below the peak in the series in 2005 (584.5 million tonnes)
- comprised 290.0 million tonnes of inward traffic, a decrease of 4.7% since 2022
- comprised 144.9 million tonnes of outward traffic, a decrease of 6.3% since 2022.

Of all **UK ports** in 2023:

- London was the UK's leading port, handling 51.6 million tonnes (11.9% of UK traffic), followed by Grimsby and Immingham with 46.0 million tonnes (10.6%), Milford Haven with 34.7 million tonnes (8.0%) and Southampton with 30.6 million tonnes (7.0%).

Northern Ireland Ports data contained in this section can be found in Table 1 of the Northern Ireland Ports Traffic 2023 file on the NISRA Ports Traffic webpage.

UK Port Data contained in this section can be found in table port0101 of the Department for Transports Port Freight Annual Statistics: 2023 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

- Over 0.9 million **road goods vehicles** passed through Northern Ireland ports in 2023.
- Belfast accounted for 70.3% of this traffic.
- Tonnage on outward road goods vehicles (7.3m tonnes) exceeded tonnage on inward road goods vehicles (7.1m tonnes).

Figure 2: Increase in the number of road goods vehicles at Northern Ireland ports over last 25 years

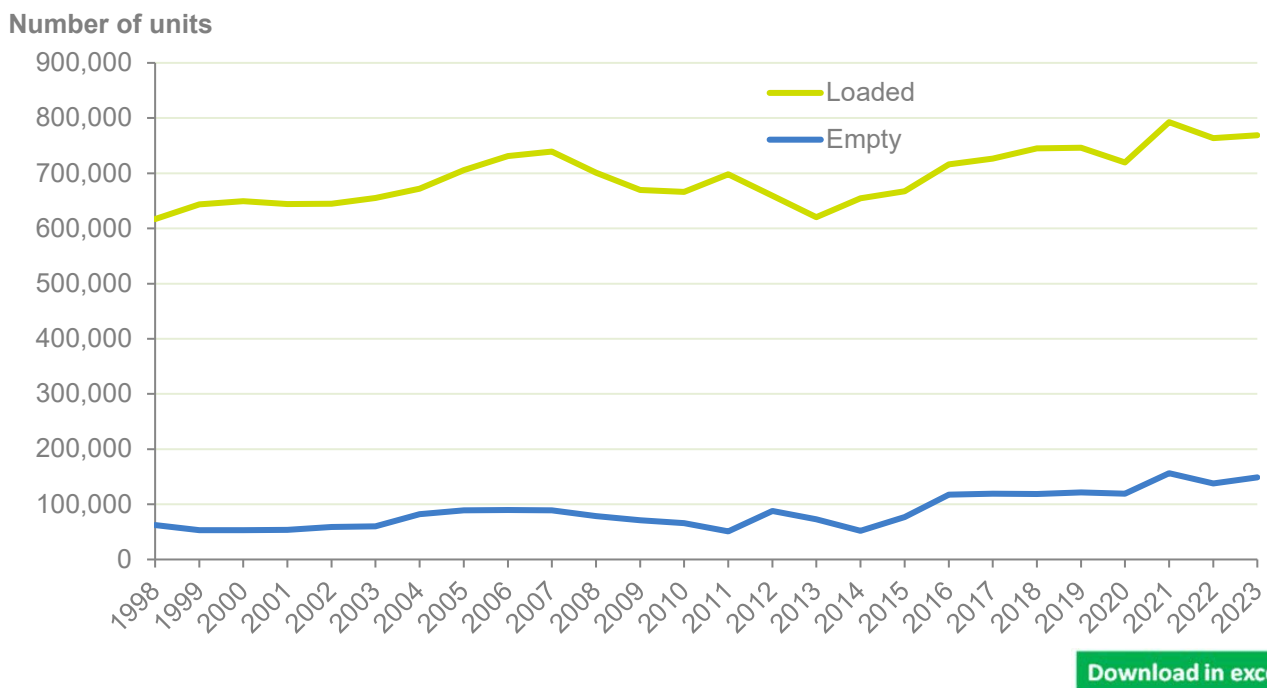**Road goods vehicles (units) - Northern Ireland, 1998-2023**

Figure 2 above shows that the number of road goods vehicles passing through Northern Ireland ports has been increasing over the last 25 years. Total road goods vehicle units have increased by 35.1%, from over 679,100 units in 1998 to over 917,400 units in 2023; the highest point in the series was 948,900 units in 2021. Loaded road goods vehicles have increased by 24.6% over the 25 year period; and empty road goods vehicles have seen a very strong growth over the last 25 years, increasing by 139.1% from 62,200 units in 1998 to 148,800 units in 2023.

A total of 917,437 road goods vehicles passed through **Northern Ireland ports** in 2023, which:

- represented an increase of 1.8% on 2022 figures
- comprised 458,875 road goods vehicles arriving in NI and 458,562 leaving
- included 768,658 loaded and 148,779 empty road goods vehicles
- mostly passed through the Belfast Port (70.3%), with the remainder passing through the Port of Larne (18.0%) and Warrenpoint (11.7%)
- was 35.1% above the number of road goods vehicles passing through ports in 1998.

A total of 6.9 million road goods vehicles passed through **UK ports** in 2023, which:

- represented an increase of 0.3% on 2022 figures
- comprised 3.4 million road goods vehicles inward and 3.5 million outward
- passed in largest numbers through the Port of Dover, accounting for 2.1 million road goods vehicles or 31.1% 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 2023 file on the NISRA Ports Traffic webpage.
UK Port Data contained in this section can be found in table port0499 of the Department for Transports Port Freight Annual Statistics: 2023 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 570,100 **non-freight vehicles** passed through NI ports in 2023.
- Belfast accounted for 78.1% of the traffic.

Figure 3: Steady decline in non-freight vehicles through Northern Ireland ports to a series low in 2020 during Covid-19, but a strong growth afterwards to 2022

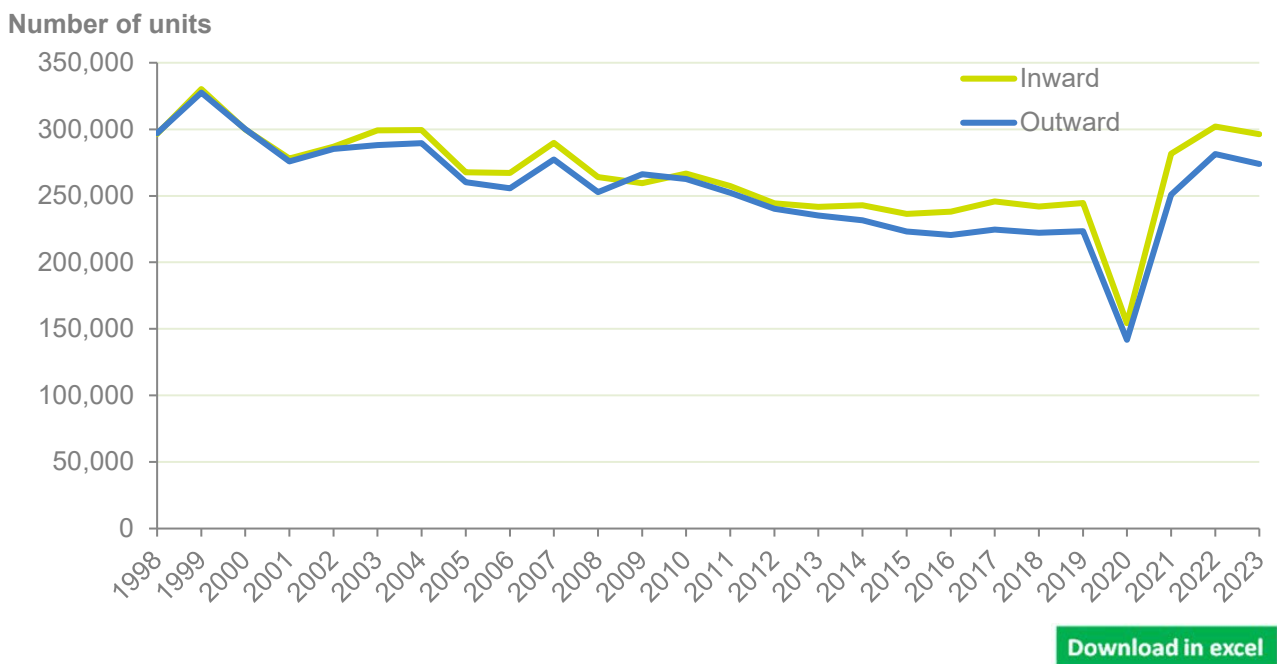Unit load carrier non-freight vehicles - Northern Ireland, 1998-2023

Figure 3 above shows that there had been a general decline in the number of non-freight vehicles passing through Northern Ireland ports from 1999 until 2020. 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 296,100 units in 2020; however this has recovered to 570,100 units in 2023.

A total of 570,114 non-freight vehicles passed through **Northern Ireland ports** in 2023, which:

- represented a decrease of 2.3% on 2022 figures
- comprised 296,217 vehicles arriving in NI and 273,897 leaving
- mostly passed through Belfast Port (78.1%), with the remainder passing through the Port of Larne (21.9%)
- was 13.3% below the number of non-freight vehicles passing through ports in 1999.

A total of 5.1 million non-freight vehicles passed through **UK ports** in 2023, which:

- represented an increase of 9.3% on 2022 figures
- comprised 2.5 million non-freight vehicles inward and 2.6 million outward
- passed in largest numbers through Dover Port, accounting for 1.6 million vehicles or 32.3% 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 2023 file on the NISRA Ports Traffic webpage.

UK Port Data contained in this section can be found in table port0499 of the Department for Transports Port Freight Annual Statistics: 2023 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

- Around 221,900 TEUs of **container traffic** passed through NI Ports in 2023.
- This represents a decrease of 6.7% on the 237,900 TEUs of container traffic in 2022.
- All the TEUs container traffic passed through Belfast.

Figure 4: Lowest number of twenty-foot Equivalent Units (TEUs) of container traffic at Northern Ireland ports in over 20 years

Twenty-foot Equivalent Units (TEUs) traffic - Northern Ireland, 2000-2023

Number of units

Figure 4 above shows the number of twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) traffic over the last 24 years. There was steady growth in the number of TEUs from 2001 to 2007, followed by a decline until 2010. From 2010 the number gradually increased until the pandemic. Although there was an increase in TEU traffic in 2021, traffic has fallen over the last two years to the lowest level in over 20 years.

A total of 221,861 TEU containers passed through **Northern Ireland ports** in 2023, which:

- represented a decrease of 6.7% on 2022 figures
- comprised 111,785 TEUs inward and 110,076 outward
- all traffic passed through the Belfast Port.

A total of 9.1 million TEU containers passed through **UK ports** in 2023, which:

- was a decrease of 6.0% on 2022 figures
- comprised 4.6 million TEUs inward and 4.5 million outward
- passed in largest numbers through Felixstowe, accounting for 3.3 million TEUs or 35.7% 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 2023 file on the NISRA Ports Traffic webpage.

UK Port Data contained in this section can be found in table port0499 of the Department for Transports Port Freight Annual Statistics: 2023 tables.

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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The next Northern Ireland Ports Traffic bulletin, including estimates for 2024, will be published in autumn 2025.

6   Index of tables

Northern Ireland Ports data (1998-2023) contained in this report can be found in the tables contained in the Northern Ireland Ports Traffic 2023 file on the NISRA Ports Traffic webpage. These include:

UK Port Data contained in this section can be found in the tables of the Department for Transports Port Freight Annual Statistics: 2023 tables.

Notes and definitions:
Tables 1 to 4 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 2000-2023 and can be found on the website:

[Northern Ireland Major Ports Traffic Data 2023](#)

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 2023

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