

Northern Ireland Broad Economy Sales and Exports Statistics 2020

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The latest estimates of local businesses' sales to markets outside Northern Ireland for 2020 are presented within this release. All values are in current prices and relate to the sales of both goods and services.

Key points

Total Sales

- In 2020, total sales by companies in Northern Ireland (NI) were estimated to be worth £67.1 billion.

Sales by Destination

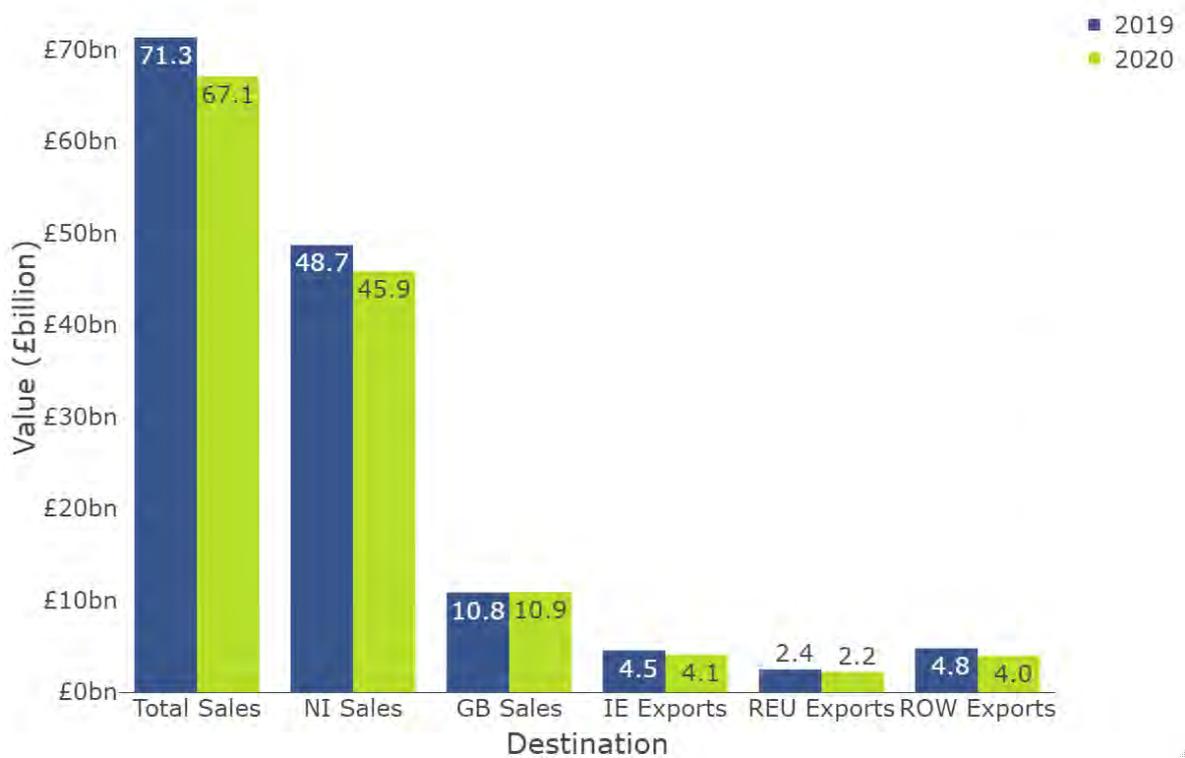
- Sales within NI amounted to £45.9 billion, accounting for 68.4% of total sales.
- The remainder of sales were fairly evenly split between those to GB (£10.9 billion) and sales to markets outside the UK (i.e. exports) of £10.3 billion, accounting for 16.3% and 15.3% of total sales respectively in 2020.
- Exports to Ireland amounted to £4.1 billion in 2020 and were noticeably higher than those to the Rest of the EU combined (£2.2 billion). At £4.0 billion, exports to the Rest of the World were marginally lower than those to Ireland, with North America accounting for half (£2.0 billion) of such sales.

Change in Sales between 2019 and 2020

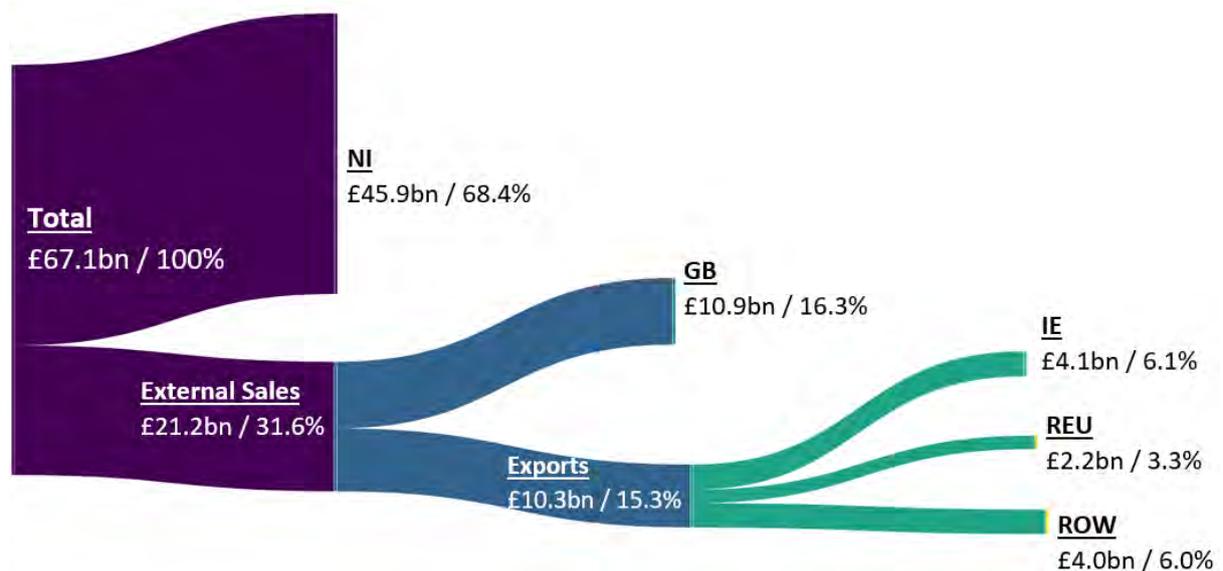
- NI's total sales decreased by 6.0% (£4.3 billion) over the calendar year, falling from £71.3 billion in 2019 to £67.1 billion in 2020. Business have reported that the Covid-19 pandemic was the significant factor in these falling sales.
- Sales within NI also decreased over the period in question (down £2.9 billion or 5.9%) as did exports to Ireland (down £0.4 billion or 9.7%), the Rest of the EU (down £0.3 billion or 10.7%) and the Rest of the World (down £0.8 billion or 16.3%).
- In contrast, sales to GB showed a marginal increase of 0.7% (£0.1 billion), rising from £10.8 billion in 2019 to £10.9 billion in 2020.

Change in Sales between 2019 and 2020

£67.1bn - 6.0%	£45.9bn - 5.9%	£10.9bn + 0.7%	£4.1bn - 9.7%
Turnover	NI Sales	GB Sales	IE Exports
£2.2bn - 10.7%	£4.0bn - 16.3%	£21.2bn - 6.2%	£10.3bn - 12.6%
REU Exports	ROW Exports	External Sales	Exports



Sales by Destination



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1 Introduction and Context

Experimental Status

The Broad Economy Sales and Exports Statistics (BESES) is an experimental annual measure of local businesses' sales to markets outside Northern Ireland (NI).

BESES data is gathered through the Northern Ireland Annual Business Inquiry and has been running since 2011. The ABI surveys all businesses with 50 or more employees; all multi-site businesses with 20-49 employees; all manufacturing businesses with more than 5 employees; and a representative sample of other smaller businesses. In all, the ABI samples about 20% of the eligible business population each year.

Ongoing development of the methodology (as outlined in the associated published [methodology paper](#) of March 2015) will be informed by user feedback, both in terms of the usefulness and reliability of the estimates and their comparability with other sources and the statistics will remain experimental until user feedback indicates that they are useful and credible. These statistics are currently undergoing review by the [Office for Statistics Regulation \(OSR\)](#) with a view to attaining [National Statistics](#) accreditation. Any comments should be sent to economicstats@nisra.gov.uk.

NISRA has engaged extensively throughout the evolution of this output with expert users of NI economic statistics whose views have already helped to inform the current approach. Users include DfE, DoF, and DAERA economists, the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre and a number of NI economic commentators and ONS methodologists. NISRA will continue to consult on any further methodological changes which may improve the quality and value of the statistics.

Users should refer to the [Broad Economy Sales and Exports Statistics Development Plan 2021](#) for further information on the progress made by NISRA in developing Northern Ireland trade statistics over the last 5 years alongside an overview of the plans for the next 2 years.

Status of figures in current bulletin

- The figures presented relate to sales of both goods and services. A goods and services split will be available in Spring 2022.
- The most recent figures, 2020, are provisional and are subject to revision in the next reporting period. As such, previously published figures for 2019 have been revised as a result of additional information becoming available since the last publication.
- Sales and exports values are reported in £ billion unless otherwise specified.
- All values are in current prices (data reported in current prices for each year are in the value of the currency for that particular year and therefore include the effects of inflation).
- Percentage changes are reported to one decimal place.
- The Broad Economy Sales and Exports series is classified as experimental (see above).
- Total UK sales can be derived by summing NI and GB sales.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has impacted on the collection and validation of business data gathered throughout the fieldwork period for survey year 2020. During this time many businesses were either closed or working on a much reduced scale. Thus the achieved

response rate of 58% is somewhat lower than the rate normally achieved (approximately 70%).

As a result, estimates for 2020 contain a larger number of imputations (estimates) than previous years and may be subject to higher revisions than normal next year.

That said, imputation methods for the survey are robust and well established, and the coefficients of variation for the headline figures for Turnover and Exports are 0.8% and 1.4% respectively, indicating a strong level of precision for the estimates.

District Council Level Data

NISRA produced exports data split by District Council Area (DCA) for the first time in the 2018 publication for the time series running from survey year 2011 - 2018. The series has been updated with 2020 data in this publication, and NISRA continues to make these experimental statistics available so that users and stakeholders can be involved in assessing their usefulness, with the intention of including this analysis as a permanent part of our suite of published statistics in future years. Users should refer to Appendix B for more information.

Definitions used in this publication

Total sales are defined as the sum of sales to Northern Ireland, Great Britain, Ireland, the Rest of the European Union (REU) and the Rest of the World (ROW). Total sales include all taxes and duties on goods invoiced with the exception of VAT which is excluded from total sales.

External sales are comprised of those sales made outside Northern Ireland, that is, sales to Great Britain, Ireland, the Rest of the European Union and the Rest of the World.

Exports consist of all sales made outside the United Kingdom.

Broad Economy: The information needed to produce BESES is collected via the NI Annual Business Inquiry (NIABI). Like the NIABI, the BESES results are classified according to the Standard Industrial Classification of Economic Activities (SIC) system. The SIC 2007 sections covered by the NIABI defines the term 'Broad Economy' and are as follows:

- A. Agriculture (support activities), forestry and fishing
- B. Mining and quarrying
- C. Manufacturing
- D. Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply
- E. Water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation activities
- F. Construction
- G. Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motor cycles (Distribution industries)
- H. Transport and storage
- I. Accommodation and food service activities
- J. Information and communication
- L. Real estate activities
- M. Professional, scientific and technical activities
- N. Administrative and support service activities
- P. Education (excludes local authority and central government bodies)
- Q. Human health and social work activities (excludes local authority and central government, and medical and dental practice activities (group 86.2))

- R. Arts, entertainment and recreation
- S. Other service activities

Users should refer to the document “[Background information - Broad Economy Sales and Exports Statistics](#)” for further detail on survey coverage and definitions.

Reference Tables

To support this release a set of reference tables with further sectoral and geographic breakdowns are available on the [NISRA website](#).

Further Information

Further information on the BESES can be accessed on the [NISRA website](#).

2 Summary and Commentary

2.1 Sales and Exports Performance

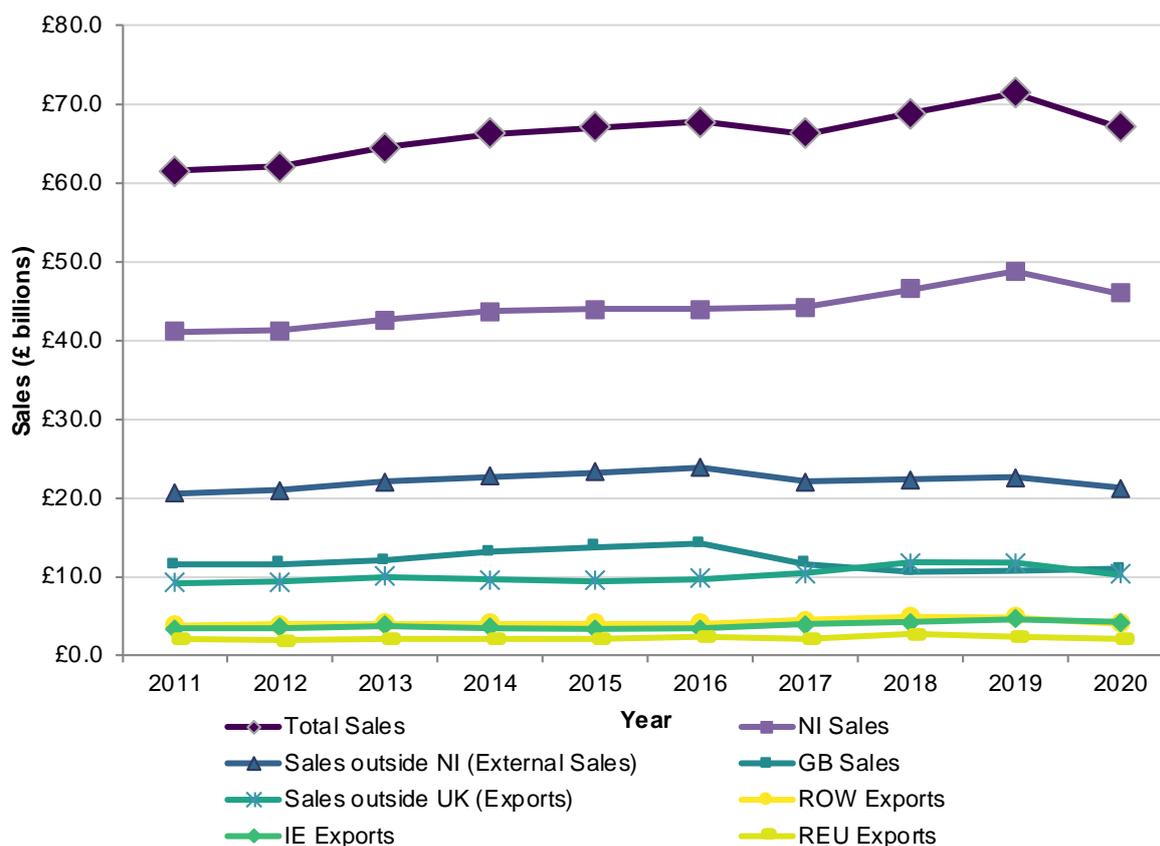
Total sales by companies in Northern Ireland (NI) were estimated to be worth £67.1 billion in 2020. This represents a decrease of 6.0% (£4.3 billion) over the year and compares to a previous annual increase of 3.7% in 2019.

In 2020, 31.6% of total sales were made to customers outside NI (external sales). This equated to £21.2 billion, representing a decrease of 6.2% (£1.4 billion) over the year.

Sales outside the UK (exports) were estimated to be worth £10.3 billion in 2020. This represented a decrease of 12.6% over the year, and follows an increase in the previous period (2018 – 2019) of 0.8%.

Figure 1 shows the values of total sales, and their broad destinations over the 9 year period (2011 to 2020). The downturn in total sales in 2020 and the concomitant effect on sales to each broad destination can be seen clearly. The vast majority of businesses reported that the decrease in total sales in 2020 was as a result of the impact of COVID-19 on business operations.

Figure 1: Sales by broad destination, 2011 – 2020 (£ billions)



[Download Figure 1 Data](#)

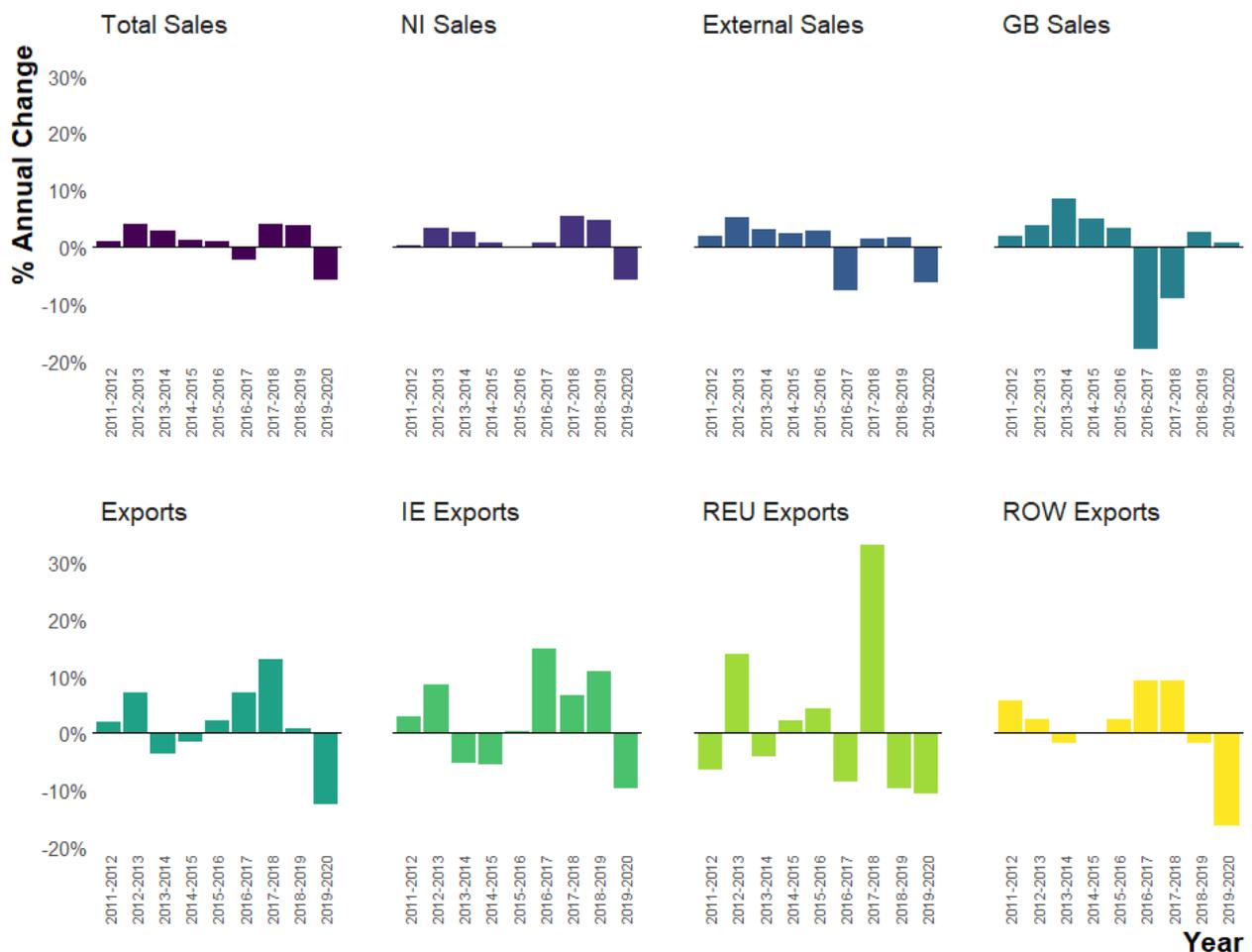
2.2 Annual Changes in Sales over Time

Figure 2 provides information on annual percentage changes in total sales to selected destinations over the entire survey history (from survey year 2011).

Prior to 2020, and with the exception of the period 2016-17, total sales have consistently grown annually, although at varying rates. In 2016-17, total sales experienced negative growth for the first time in the time series - this was mainly driven by the first recorded decrease in GB sales. GB sales continued to experience negative growth in 2017-18, albeit at a reduced rate compared to 2016-17, but returned to positive growth over 2018-19 and GB was the only destination with sales growth in 2019-20.

Prior to 2020, NI sales had never fallen annually. The fall in exports in 2019-20 breaks the pattern of consistent growth in more recent years (from 2015-16 onwards). Exports to IE mirror this broad pattern, while the growth rates for REU and ROW are more erratic.

Figure 2: Annual Rate of Growth of Sales to Broad Destinations, 2011 – 2020



[Download Figure 2 Data](#)

2.3 Analysis by Destination

Figures 3 and 4 below provide information on the value of total sales by destination in 2020 and the distribution of sales by broad destination over the course of the history of the survey (i.e.: from survey year 2011).

Over the last year (i.e. between 2019 and 2020), total sales decreased by 6.0% (£4.3 billion). This was largely driven by decreasing sales within NI (down 5.9% or £2.9 billion) and decreasing exports (down 12.6% or £1.5 billion).

Over the last year, exports to IE (£4.1 billion) have decreased by 9.7% (£0.4 billion). This follows an increase of 10.7% between 2018 and 2019 and 6.7% between 2017 and 2018. Exports to the REU decreased by 10.7% over the year while exports to the ROW decreased by 16.3%.

Sales to GB increased by £0.1 billion to £10.9 billion, up 0.7% over the year. GB is the only destination to experience a growth, albeit modest, in sales over the year. GB remained the most significant single market for external sales from Northern Ireland businesses, accounting for 16.3% of total sales.

Sales to outside the UK (exports) accounted for 15.3% of total sales. Exports to IE accounted for 6.1% of total sales and approximately two fifths (39.9%) of sales outside the UK. IE remains our single largest export market.

Over the course of 2020 exports to the REU¹ decreased by 10.7% (£0.3 billion) to £2.2 billion. Exports to the REU accounted for 3.3% of total sales and over a fifth of exports (21.3%).

Exports to the ROW² decreased by £0.8 billion (16.3%) over the year, to £4.0 billion. ROW sales accounted for 6.0% of total sales, and 38.9% of all exports.

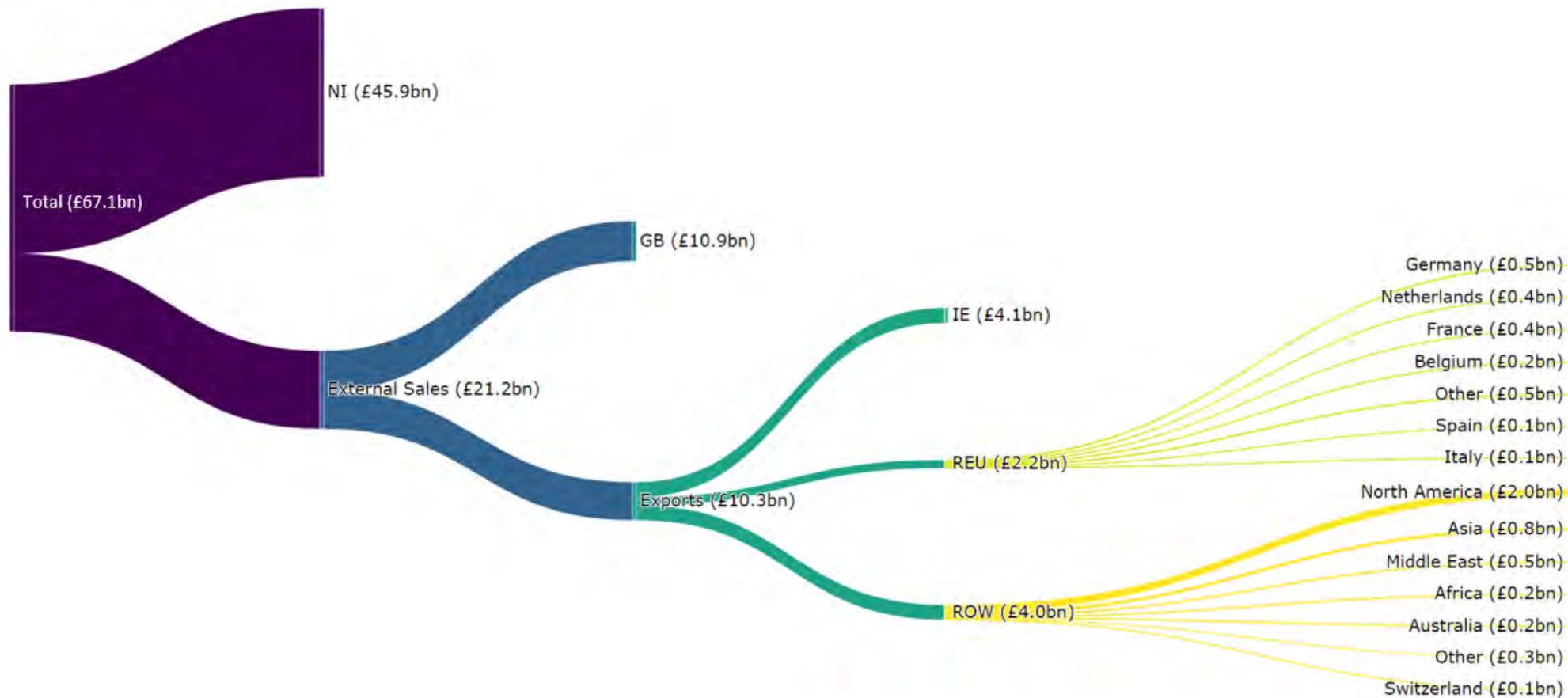
External sales to markets outside NI are comprised of sales to GB plus the value of exports combined. These decreased by £1.4 billion to £21.2 billion, and accounted for almost one third of total sales in 2020 (31.6%).

Despite the large fall in total sales in 2019 - 2020, the relative distribution of sales to each destination has remained very similar to previous years. Figure 4 shows that the proportion of sales to each broad destination has remained relatively constant from 2011.

¹ A list of EU member countries is available on the [Official Website of the European Union](#)

² The Rest of World refers to all destinations outside the European Union

Figure 3: Total Sales by Destination, 2020 (£ billion)



Figures may not sum due to rounding

Figure 4: Distribution of Sales by broad Destination, 2011 – 2020



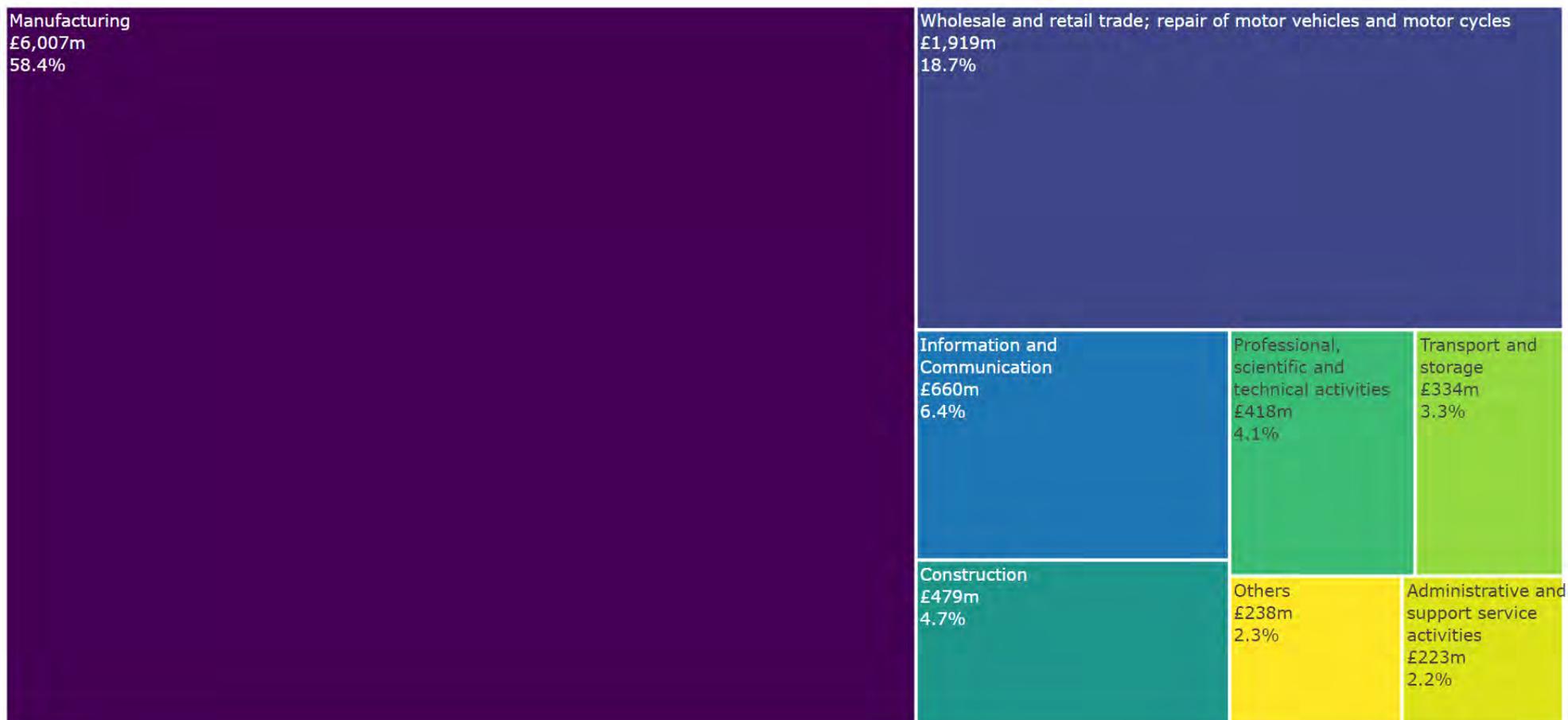
[Download Figure 4 Data](#)

2.4 Analysis by Industry Section

In 2020, the largest proportion of export sales was from the Manufacturing sector (Section C) which accounted for 58.4% (£6.0 billion) of all exports sales (£10.3 billion). Manufacturing exports decreased by 13.0% over the year, but have increased by 8.4% between 2011 and 2020.

The next largest exporter was Wholesale and Retail Trade (Section G) with 18.7% (£1.9 billion) of all exports sales. Exports in this section decreased by 12.2% over the year. This was followed by Information and Communication (Section J) which accounted for 6.4% of export sales (£0.7 billion) and Construction (Section F) which accounted for 4.7% (£0.5 billion) of export sales.

Figure 5: Export Sales by Industry Section, 2020 (£ millions)



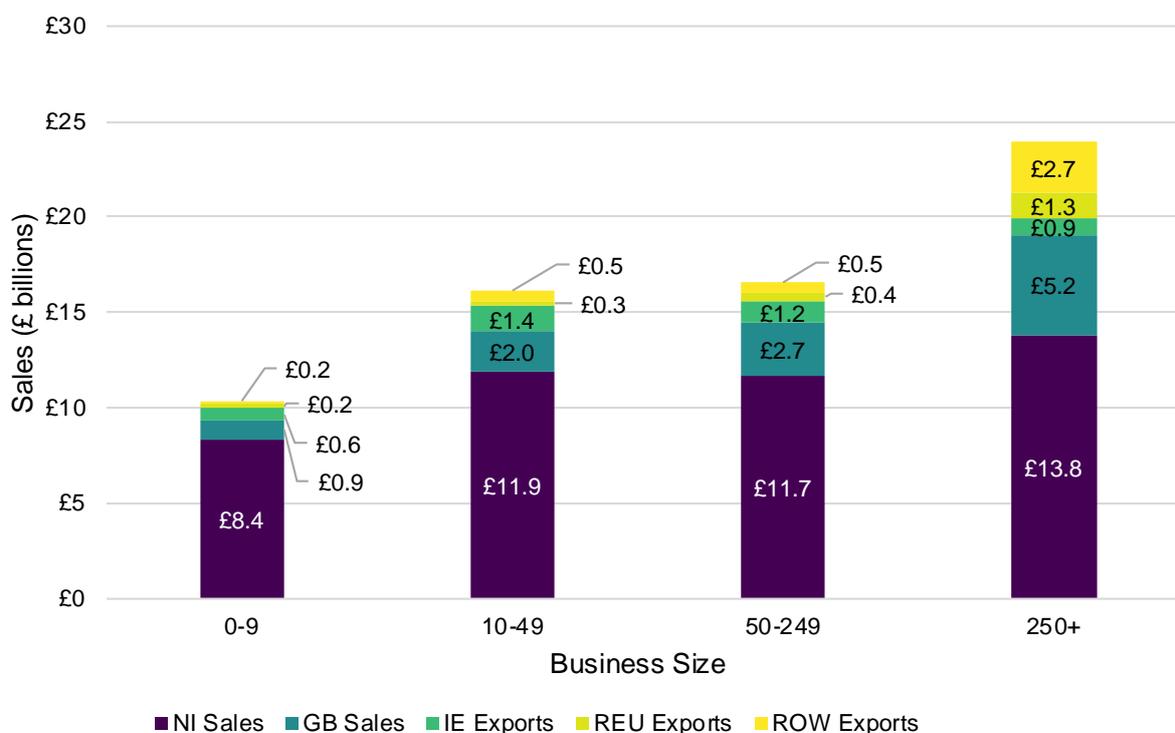
Others refers to the following industry sectors: Water Supply; Sewerage, Waste Management And Remediation Activities; Electricity, Gas, Steam And Air Conditioning Supply; Agriculture, Forestry And Fishing; Mining And Quarrying; Real Estate Activities; Accommodation And Food Service Activities; Education (excludes local authority and central government bodies); Human health and social work activities (excludes local authority and central government, and medical and dental practice activities (group 86.2)); Arts, entertainment and recreation; Other service activities.

2.5 Analysis by Business Size

In 2020, large businesses (those with 250+ employees) had the highest total sales (£24.0 billion) and exports (£4.9 billion). Large businesses also exported more to both the REU and ROW than all other businesses combined. However exports to IE were largely driven by businesses with fewer than 250 employees.

Micro and small businesses (0-9 employees and 10-49 employees respectively) were much more reliant on NI sales, with larger proportions of their total sales made within NI, than the medium (50-249 employees) and large (250+ employees) businesses; 81.0%, 73.9%, 70.7% and 57.7% respectively.

Figure 6: Destination of Sales by Business Employment Size, 2020 (£ billions)



[Download Figure 6 Data](#)

2.6 Analysis by District Council Area

Maps showing the value of exports by District Council Area (DCA) and the number of exporters by District Council Area are presented in figures 7 and 8 respectively. In 2020, the largest value of exports came from businesses located in Belfast. Three of the top five exporters were DCAs situated next to the border with IE.

A similar pattern emerges when looking at the number of exporters, with Belfast and DCAs adjacent to the border having a larger number of exporters.

In some instances it is not possible to assign a business to a postcode. This is usually because the head office is outside NI. Such trade is labelled as "Unassigned". In 2020, £521 million export sales and 331 exporters could not be allocated to a DCA. Users should refer to Appendix B for more information.

Figure 7: Value of exports by District Council Area, 2020 (£ millions)

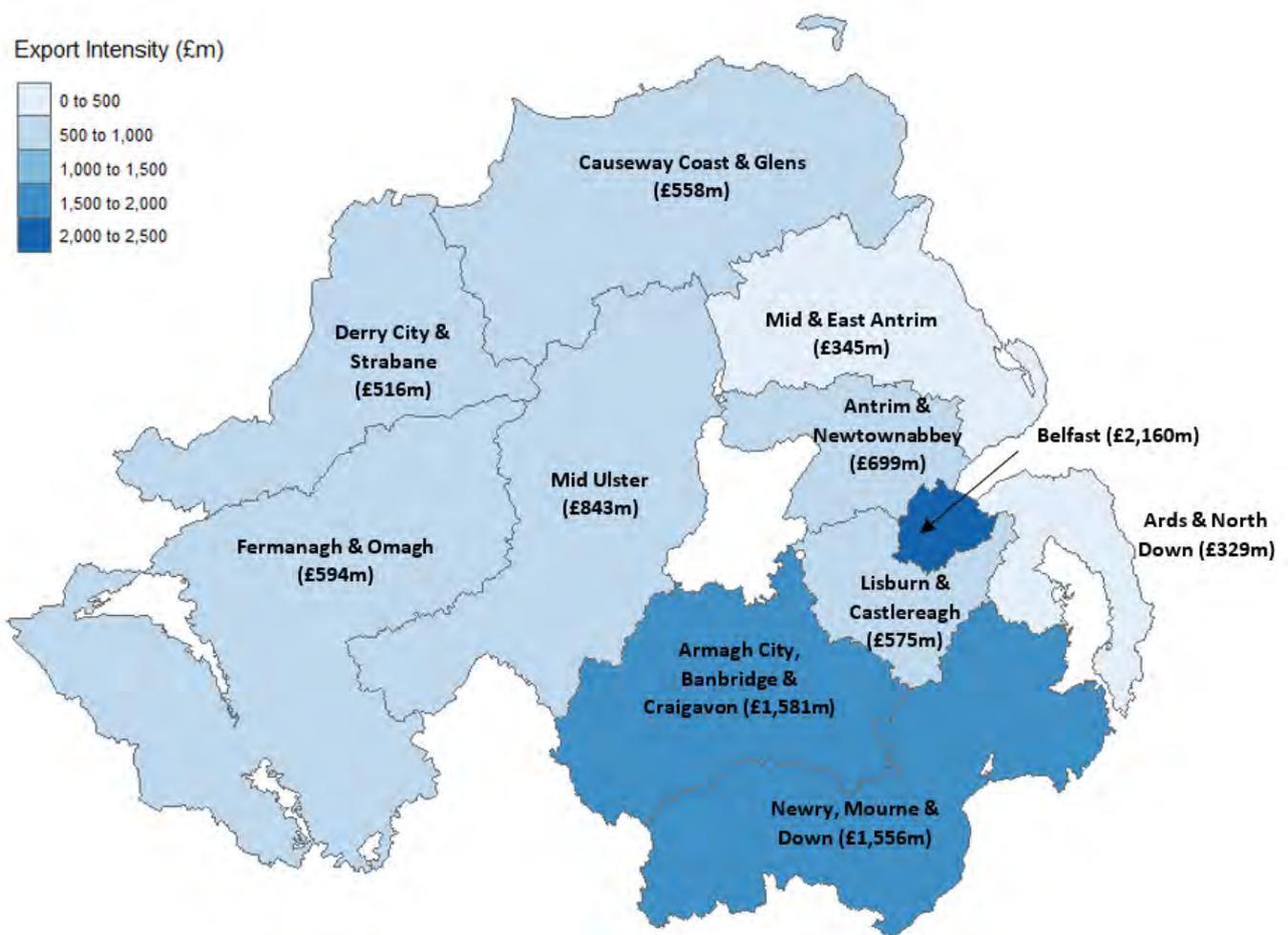
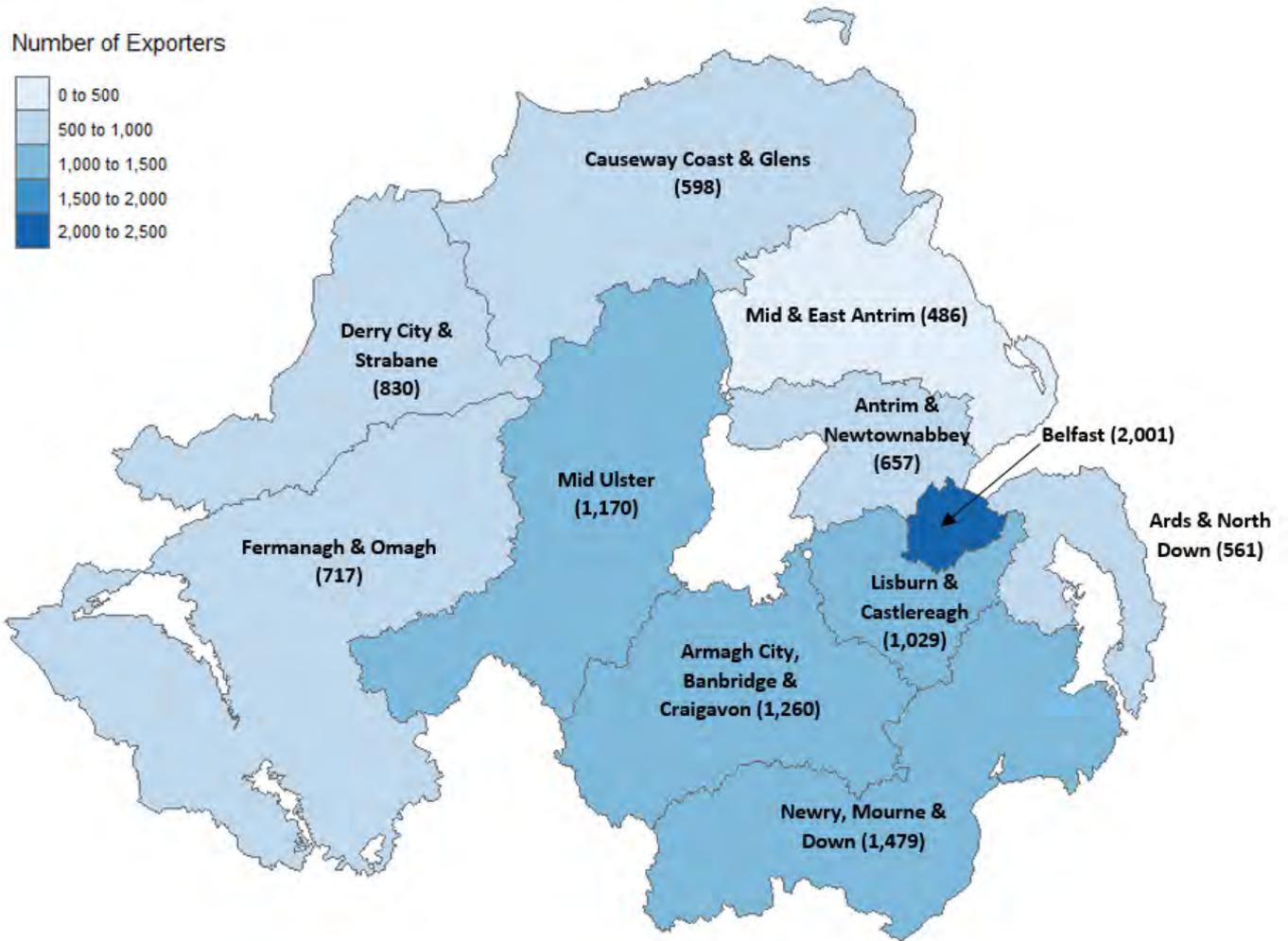


Figure 8: Number of exporters by District Council Area, 2020



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Table 1.2	Annual Series Turnover by industry sector, 2011 - 2020
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Table 1.4	Annual Series Exports to markets within the rest of the EU and annual change, 2011 - 2020
Table 1.5	Annual Series Exports to markets outside the EU and annual change, 2011 - 2020
Table 1.6	Annual Series Sales & exports to broad destinations by business size, 2011 - 2020
Table 1.7	Annual Series Number of sellers and exporters by broad destinations and business size, 2011 - 2020
Table 1.8	Annual Series Number of businesses selling to destinations outside NI (External sales) by industry section, 2011 - 2020
Table 1.9	Annual Series Number of businesses exporting from NI by industry section, 2011 - 2020
Table 1.10	Annual Series Sales & exports by broad destination and District Council Area, 2011 - 2020
Table 1.11	Annual Series Number of businesses selling & exporting by broad destination and District Council Area, 2011 - 2020

The tables below include annual estimates with associated quality indicators (confidence intervals and coefficient of variation)

Table 2.1	2020	Sales & exports to broad destinations
Table 2.2	2020	Broad destination by industry sector
Table 2.3	2020	Exports to markets within the rest of the EU
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Table 2.5	2020	Broad destination by business size
Table 3.1	2019	Sales & exports to broad destinations
Table 3.2	2019	Broad destination by industry sector
Table 3.3	2019	Exports to markets within the rest of the EU
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Table 3.5	2019	Broad destination by business size
Table 4.1	2018	Sales & exports to broad destinations
Table 4.2	2018	Broad destination by industry sector
Table 4.3	2018	Exports to markets within the rest of the EU
Table 4.4	2018	Exports to markets outside the EU
Table 4.5	2018	Broad destination by business size
Table 5.1	2017	Sales & exports to broad destinations
Table 5.2	2017	Broad destination by industry sector
Table 5.3	2017	Exports to markets within the rest of the EU
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Table 5.5	2017	Broad destination by business size
Table 6.1	2016	Sales & exports to broad destinations
Table 6.2	2016	Broad destination by industry sector
Table 6.3	2016	Exports to markets within the rest of the EU
Table 6.4	2016	Exports to markets outside the EU
Table 6.5	2016	Broad destination by business size

Table 7.1	2015	Sales & exports to broad destinations
Table 7.2	2015	Broad destination by industry sector
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Table 10.1	2012	Sales & exports to broad destinations
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Table 11.4	2011	Exports to markets outside the EU
Table 11.5	2011	Broad destination by business size



[BESES Tables – 2020 \(Microsoft Excel\)](#)



[BESES Tables – 2020 \(Open Document Spreadsheet\)](#)

4 Background Notes

Background

The Northern Ireland Executive's [Economic Strategy](#) referred to the need to improve the measurement of Northern Ireland's exports beyond that of the manufacturing sector. NISRA subsequently published initial estimates of 'broad economy' sales and exports by industry sector in [March 2015](#).

This release provides revised estimates for 2019 and provisional estimates for 2020. In addition, estimates of the number of businesses selling to markets outside Northern Ireland are presented. NISRA produced trade estimates split by District Council Area for the first time in the 2018 publication and have continued to do so in this publication to allow users to provide feedback.

The contents of this report will be of interest to government policy makers, Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), the business community, economic commentators, academics and members of the general public with an interest in the NI economy.

The BESES data has been of significant interest to Departments involved in EU Exit preparations and negotiations. Users of the data include the Department for the Economy (DfE), the Department of Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), the Department for Exiting the EU (DExEU), HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC), HM Treasury (HMT) and the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

The latest Department for the Economy [Economic Commentary](#) provides an overview of the state of the Northern Ireland economy, setting it in a global context.

DfE have also relied heavily on the BESES data as part of their EU Exit related research. Some of their research and analysis can be found on the [DfE EU Exit Analysis](#) webpage.

Other sources

Further information relating to Northern Ireland exports has historically been available from the Exporting Northern Ireland Services Study (ENIS). The Exporting Northern Ireland Services (ENIS) Study is a survey which was first introduced by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in 2003 to further understand and estimate the value to the Northern Ireland economy of exporting services. The study is based on information collected via the International Trade in Services Survey (ITIS), which additionally collects information on the nature of services. However, service sector sales outside Northern Ireland are now collected via the BESES. In light of developments on the production of the BESES NISRA have ceased publication of the ENIS series (last published in August 2015). The ITIS data will continue to be collected for UK level purposes and NISRA will consult with users on any future plans in relation to this.

The International Trade in Services (ITIS) survey is a UK wide survey which collects information on overseas transactions of consultants and companies offering business services. Information collected from the survey is fed into the UK balance of payments and published at the UK level. The full bulletin can be accessed on the [ONS website](#).

While directly comparable UK data for the BESES does not exist (the BESES covers goods and services produced in Northern Ireland), HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) are responsible for collecting the [UK's international trade in goods data](#), which are published as two National Statistics series - the 'Overseas Trade Statistics (OTS) of the UK' and the 'UK Regional Trade Statistics (RTS)'.

Interactive mapping tool

NISRA has developed an interactive trade in goods map to allow users to explore official trade in goods data by country and world region using data from HMRC's Regional Trade Statistics. The tool was developed by NISRA based on the existing [UN Comtrade](#) tool developed by [DIT \(Department for International Trade\)](#) and [BEIS \(Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy\)](#) and can be found below.

[UK Regions Imports and Exports of Goods by Country and World Region](#)

Counts of Businesses Exporting

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) produces [a count of importers and exporters in GB](#). For conceptual reasons, ONS were not able to derive data for NI as part of this series. While the methodologies used by NISRA and ONS to produce their respective counts are broadly similar, users should be aware that differences still exist and caution should be exercised when comparing the two measures.

The methodology used by the ONS can be found in the [Annual Business Survey \(ABS\): Exporters and Importers in Great Britain, 2014 PDF \(523KB\)](#) information paper.

The Scottish Government also publish export statistics from the Exports Statistics Scotland series. These statistics can be accessed on the [Scottish Governments website](#).

The Government Statistical Service (GSS) has issued guidance on comparing official statistics produced by each nation of the UK. This guidance can be found in the report [Comparing Official Statistics Across the UK PDF \(635KB\)](#).

NISRA's exports statistics are considered as "Partially Comparable at Level D" with the ONS's statistics on importers and exporters in GB on the [ONS website](#).

Level D comparability is described as:

"Figures which are produced from separate sources of data. Methods and standards are broadly comparable, but users should be made aware of the limitations."

User Engagement

We welcome any feedback you might have in relation to this report, and would be particularly interested in knowing how you make use of these data to inform your work. Please contact us at economicstats@nisra.gov.uk.

Next Publication

A further disaggregation of the data in this bulletin into its goods and services components will be published in Spring 2022.

Imports data for survey year 2020 will be published in Summer 2022.

The next bulletin, with results for survey year 2021, will be published in December 2022.

All publications will be available on the [NISRA website](#).

For Further Information

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5 Appendices

5.1 Appendix A: Overview of Methodology to Estimate the Number of Businesses Selling Outside NI

Ongoing advancements in the Broad Economy Sales and Exports Statistics series include the development of an estimate of the number of businesses that trade to particular destinations.

The method for creating the counts is an adaptation of the method used to derive population estimates for the destination variables. Full details of the BESES methodology can be found in Appendix B of the methodology paper on the [Production of Northern Ireland Broad Economy Exports Estimates](#).

Users should pay particular note to the gaps in survey coverage when using these data.

To derive the counts, only the design weight is used when weighting returned data. The design or 'a' weight is a simple expansion estimator (i.e. $\frac{N}{n}$) for similar groups in the population

An example of how the number of exporters in a particular stratum is found is shown below:

In stratum x there are 6 returns (n_x) from a population of 12 businesses (N_x).
The a weight for stratum x (a_x) is given by:

$$a_x = \frac{N_x}{n_x} = \frac{12}{6} = 2$$

If, say, 3 of the 6 responders in stratum x are exporters, then the estimated number of exports in x is given by:

$exporters_x = a_x \times \text{number of returned exporters in } x$, so

$$exporters_x = 2 \times 3 = 6$$

The total number of exporters in the population is thus given by summing the number of exporters in each stratum.

The methodology used to compute these counts is in its infancy and, at this stage, the estimates should be considered as experimental statistics.

NISRA is constantly working to improve and develop BESES output and welcomes any feedback users might have. Ongoing development of the methodology will be informed by user feedback, both in terms of the usefulness and reliability of the estimates and their comparability with other sources. Any comments should be sent to economicstats@nisra.gov.uk.

5.2 Appendix B: Overview of Methodology used to produce estimates split by District Council Area

Ongoing advancements in the Broad Economy Sales and Exports Statistics series include the development of an estimate of both the value of trade and the number of businesses that trade split by District Council Area.

A business is assigned to a geographical location within Northern Ireland based on the postcode of the address of the site which reports Northern Ireland activity, i.e. the Northern Ireland Reporting Unit. This is usually the main operating site or 'head office' within Northern Ireland.

The postcodes are matched to geographical areas in Northern Ireland using the [NISRA Central Postcode Directory](#).

In some instances it is not possible to assign a business to a postcode. This is usually because the head office is outside NI. Such trade is labelled as "Unassigned".

Users should also be aware of a "Head Office" effect. Trade data is based on reporting unit (i.e. head office) information which means that all trade activity is coded based on the classification and location of the reporting unit. However, in reality, a business may have multiple sites or indeed a dedicated transport/logistics site from which goods are transported. This trade will still be reported under the reporting unit.

NISRA is constantly working to improve and develop BESES output and welcomes any feedback users might have. As part of an experimental series, the use and utility of the DCA splits will be monitored both in terms of the usefulness and reliability of the estimates and their comparability with other sources. User feedback will determine whether these statistics are credible and useful and whether we will continue with their production. Any comments should be sent to economicstats@nisra.gov.uk.