

EXPORTING EXCELLENCE



SPOTLIGHT ON
NORTHERN IRELAND

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Heathrow

Contents

Executive summary	3
Exporting Excellence – Heathrow’s plan for growth	4
Putting sustainability at the heart of trade and export policy	4
Making the UK the global leader in customs modernisation and digitalisation	5
Getting export skills to take-off	5
Case studies	6
Conclusion	7
References	8

Executive summary

Exporting is vital to the Northern Irish economy and its future growth. Northern Ireland exports £9.3 billion¹ of goods per year, supporting 129,000 jobs².

Northern Ireland's direct route to Heathrow is a vital commercial link to the rest of the UK. From Belfast's shipbuilding heritage to the nation's emerging tech sector, local businesses rely on this thriving connection to access domestic and global markets. Over 300,000 passengers fly between the nation and Heathrow each year, generating more than £120 million in trade and investment³.

As the UK's only hub airport, Heathrow is a vital partner to businesses across Northern Ireland, helping connect them to 239 destinations in 89 countries and 95% of the global economy within a direct flight from Heathrow. Using Heathrow's global network, UK exports to non-EU nations via the airport were worth over £100 billion in 2023 alone.

This is linked to Heathrow's hub model, that enables the airport to pool passenger and cargo demand to increase route capacity and optimise opportunities for Northern Irish exporters, with 95% of the airport's air cargo travelling in the belly hold of passenger aircraft.

While the Northern Irish export market grows and evolves, there is a wealth of untapped potential. In Northern Ireland, there are an additional 7,700 SMEs which do not currently export goods but could be exporting. Unlocking that capacity would double the number of exporters in Northern Ireland⁴.

Across the UK, that shortfall amounts to £290bn of potential export revenue a year⁵. Unlocking just 10% of this capacity could create 215,000 jobs, with an additional 50,000 jobs in the professional and scientific sectors alone. Currently, each exporting job in Northern Ireland generates £72,000 of export⁶.

To understand how to overcome the challenges businesses are facing – and what is needed to help them to realise their potential – Heathrow visited the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry to hear from businesses first-hand. Using the feedback from these discussions, we published our national [Exporting Excellence report](#). The national report recommends actionable solutions which could boost exports, which could boost exports and starts a conversation on how government, industry, SMEs and Heathrow can work together to boost growth.

This *Spotlight on Northern Ireland* focuses on the great work of exporting businesses in Northern Ireland and how the exporting potential of the nation can be unlocked with the right support.

NORTHERN IRELAND EXPORTER SPOTLIGHT



Exporting excellence – Heathrow's plan for growth

Putting sustainability at the heart of trade and export policy

Businesses in Northern Ireland are working hard to reduce their carbon footprint. At Heathrow's Exporting Excellence roundtables, the businesses we spoke to explicitly called for government to support SMEs to export sustainably, whilst minimising extra burdens and costs.

Air cargo can have up to 70% reduction in emissions if sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) is used. SAF is derived from non-fossil carbon resources, such as cooking oil and household waste. Heathrow is encouraging airlines to use SAF through its incentive scheme, which roughly halves the price gap between kerosene and SAF. This helps deliver the airport's sustainability plan which aims to cut carbon on the ground at Heathrow by

“There's no financial support in customs to help exporters or importers trying to work digitally.”

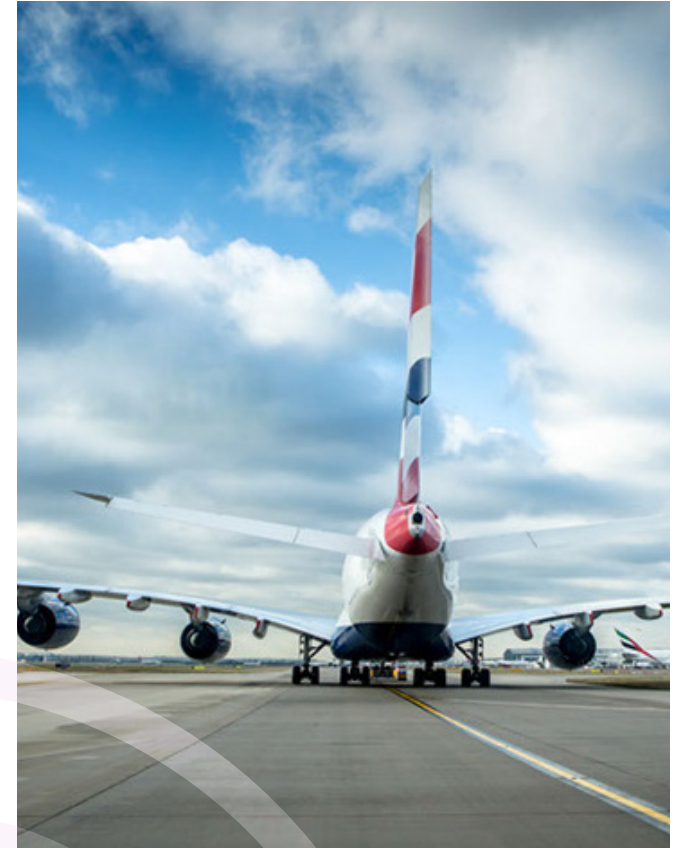
Roundtable attendee

at least 45%, and by 15% in the air by 2030. However, the UK may become reliant on imported SAF unless further efforts are made to unlock private investments in domestic SAF production. Supporting the UK's SAF industry could create 10,300 jobs and generate nearly £1.8bn of GVA by 2030, rising to 60,000 jobs and over £10bn GVA by 2050.

“We're expanding into Oman and Qatar right now and it was the first question they asked us: are your products sustainable?”

Roundtable attendee

The government has started to introduce policies which drive demand for SAF and address the price gap between SAF and traditional jet fuel. However, these policies will not start to take effect until 2025 at the earliest. There is significant appetite to invest in SAF in the UK, but investors want certainty in the longer-term uptake of this technology before pouring in their capital. This can be achieved by introducing a price support mechanism – a solution which would help to cut the price premium and was successfully used to boost solar and wind technologies in the UK. Heathrow believes that this mechanism will reduce costs and the environmental impact of their exports. But it must be delivered urgently to have the impact needed.



Making the UK the global leader in customs modernisation and digitalisation

Exporting involves extensive paperwork. While exporters are constantly innovating, the exporting process has not kept pace. In 2022, exporters submitted 95.1 million customs declarations potentially spanning up to 12 pages each. If stacked, this pile of paperwork would reach six times higher than a plane's standard cruising altitude. Adopting a digital-first system under the UK's Border Target Operating Model could save businesses £190 million in importing costs alone.

There are clear actions the government can take straightaway. Moving towards a paperless system with a 'once-and-done' data approach will simplify exporting and reduce costs for businesses and their customers. Rolling out the national pilot 'ecosystem of trust' model and using digital means to avoid unnecessary rescanning of previously screened air cargo is crucial for efficient trade. Exempting securely trucked air cargo from current Department for Transport rescreening rules at UK airports would enhance border efficiency. These measures will cut costs and boost the global competitiveness of UK exporters.

Getting export skills to take-off

The UK cannot achieve its economic potential if the country does not have the right mix of skills to handle the complexities of compliance and logistics. During its tour of the UK, Heathrow witnessed new initiatives being developed to tackle the export skills shortage, many of them driven by businesses themselves.

But there is a consensus that the country needs to go further and faster. The UK needs a national campaign to highlight the potential a career in exports could offer. A campaign would combine the efforts of industry, government and business groups to encourage more people to join the sector. Delivering this campaign would involve local chambers of commerce, further education colleges, and relevant officials all working together to create the right UK skills mix. This campaign would secure the future skills pipeline for exporters while creating opportunities for young people in Northern Ireland to build aspirational careers in international trade.

“ If the materials are sustainable and eco-friendly, we should be getting help with the tariffs on those goods.”

Roundtable attendee



CASE STUDY

Premier Packaging Solutions

Premier Packaging Solutions is a Northern Irish company specialising in quality bespoke, plain, and printed packaging for various sectors, including the hospitality, patisserie, gift and wholesale industries.

Operating from Newtownards, 12 miles outside of Belfast, the business's frequent and reliable links to Heathrow have been crucial for the company's success. They have grown their international exports, with the possibility of future expansion into Australasian and African markets.

“ We currently use Heathrow as a hub to the rest of the planet. We export to around 40 countries; Heathrow enables us to quote those jobs with confidence, knowing they're going to get to their destination safely and on time.”

Mark McMahon,

Founder and Director, Premier Packaging Solutions, Newtownards



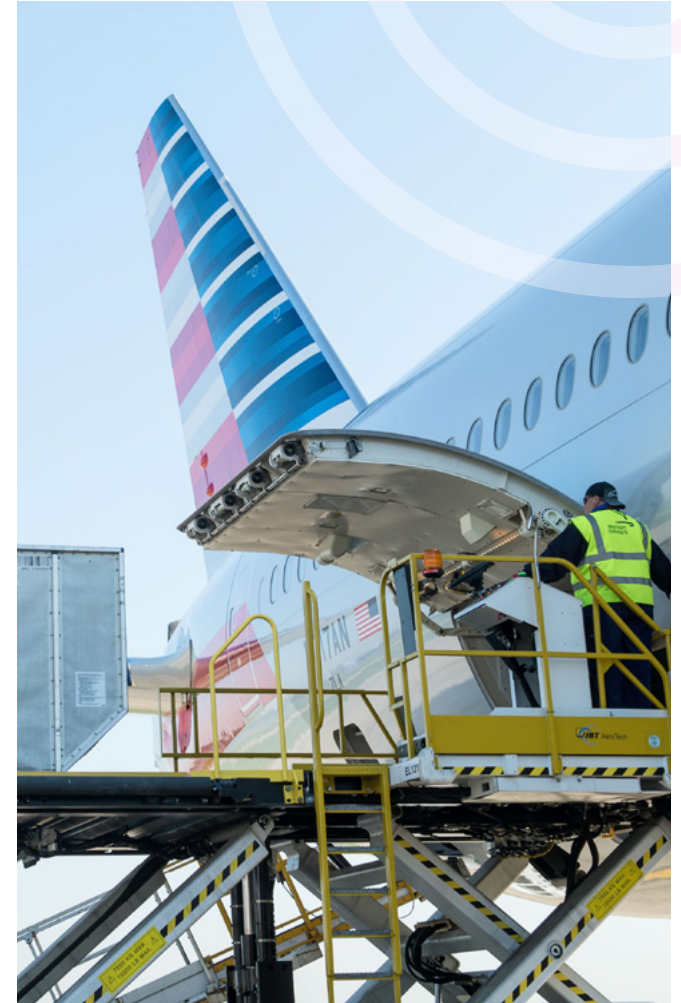
Conclusion

Implementing these ideas will be crucial to unlocking the full potential of Northern Ireland's economy, and the more than 7,700 goods exporters operating in the nation alongside new exporters and their supply chains. This will help boost exports, drive up jobs in the region and accelerate growth across the UK.

Find out more

If you have any questions or queries on how Heathrow can work with decision-makers and industry to unlock the opportunities of growing exports in Northern Ireland, please contact:

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