

Research Briefing

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Statistics on UK trade with the Commonwealth



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Summary

This short note provides some information on Commonwealth membership and key statistics on UK trade with the Commonwealth.

In 2023:

- UK exports to the Commonwealth were worth £89 billion; British imports from the Commonwealth were worth £75 billion.
- The UK had a trade surplus with the Commonwealth of £14 billion – a deficit in goods was offset by a surplus in services.
- The value of UK exports to the Commonwealth increased by 7% in cash terms (i.e., unadjusted for inflation) between 2022 and 2023, while the value of imports from the Commonwealth fell by 0.4%.
- The Commonwealth accounted for 9% of the UK's total trade (i.e., the combined value of exports and imports) – 10% of UK exports and 8% of UK imports.
- UK trade with the Commonwealth was more focused on services than goods – services accounted for 60% of UK exports to Commonwealth and 51% of imports from the Commonwealth.
- UK trade with the Commonwealth was heavily focused on five countries – Australia, Canada, India, Singapore and South Africa; combined these countries accounted for 75% of UK exports to the Commonwealth and 69% of UK imports from the Commonwealth.
- Trade with these five countries was more geared towards services than goods - services accounted for 57% of the UK's total trade with Australia, Canada, India, Singapore and South Africa (i.e., the combined value of exports and imports), while goods accounted for 43%.

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The Commonwealth

The Commonwealth is a political association made up of 56 member states (including the UK). Gabon and Togo are the most recent countries to join the Commonwealth, joining in June 2022.¹ Prior to this, Rwanda was the last country to join the Commonwealth, joining in 2009.

The Commonwealth has a combined population of 2.5 billion, though Commonwealth countries vary greatly in size – India accounts for over half of the Commonwealth’s population with a population of 1.4 billion. Twenty-four Commonwealth countries have a population of under 1 million; Tuvalu and Nauru are the least populous Commonwealth members, with populations of around 10,000.²

Commonwealth countries also vary greatly in their economic development – in 2022, Australia, Canada and Singapore had a GDP per capita of over \$50,000 while five Commonwealth countries had a GDP per capita of less than \$1,000.³

Most Commonwealth countries are former British colonies, though some have no historic colonial or constitutional links with the UK – Mozambique gained independence from Portugal in 1975, while Rwanda gained independence from Belgium in 1962; Gabon and Togo were both former French colonies.

14 Commonwealth members states are ‘Commonwealth realms’, having the King as monarch and head of state – Antigua and Barbuda, Australia, Bahamas, Belize, Canada, Grenada, Jamaica, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, the Solomon Islands and Tuvalu.

Barbados was previously a Commonwealth realm, though became a republic in November 2021.⁴

Two Commonwealth states – Cyprus and Malta - are also members of the European Union.

For more information on the history, membership and functions of the Commonwealth, see the Library briefing [The Commonwealth](#).

¹ The Commonwealth, [Gabon and Togo join the Commonwealth](#), 25 June 2022

² The Commonwealth, [Member countries](#)
































³ Data from IMF, World Economic Outlook database

⁴ House of Commons Library, [Barbados becomes a republic](#), 29 November 2021

























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Commonwealth member states

The tables below list Commonwealth member states, the year they joined the Commonwealth, their population, GDP and GDP per head.

Commonwealth member states				
Country	Year joined	Population (millions)	GDP, 2023 (\$ billions)	GDP per head (\$)
 Antigua and Barbuda	1981	0.1	2.0	19,123
 Australia	1931	26.6	1,741.9	65,434
 Bahamas	1973	0.4	13.8	34,224
 Bangladesh	1972	170.3	446.3	2,621
 Barbados	1966	0.3	6.4	22,020
 Belize	1981	0.5	3.1	6,865
 Botswana	1966	2.7	20.4	7,642
 Brunei	1984	0.4	15.1	34,248
 Cameroon	1995	28.6	49.0	1,711
 Canada	1931	40.0	2,140.1	53,548
 Cyprus	1961	0.9	32.2	34,957
 Dominica	1978	0.1	0.7	8,837
 Eswatini	1968	1.2	4.9	4,184
 Fiji ¹	1970	0.9	5.5	5,993
 Gabon	2022	2.2	20.5	9,290
 The Gambia ²	1965	2.6	2.4	893
 Ghana	1957	32.9	76.3	2,318
 Grenada	1974	0.1	1.3	11,624
 Guyana	1966	0.8	17.1	21,472
 India	1947	1,428.6	3,572.1	2,500
 Jamaica	1962	2.7	18.9	6,876
 Kenya	1963	51.5	108.9	2,113
 Kiribati	1979	0.1	0.3	2,231
 Lesotho	1966	2.1	2.2	1,052
 Malawi	1964	22.7	13.1	578
 Malaysia	1957	33.1	415.6	12,570
 Maldives ³	1982	0.4	6.7	16,823
 Malta	1964	0.5	21.0	38,674
 Mauritius	1968	1.3	14.4	11,396
 Mozambique	1995	33.9	21.4	630
 Namibia	1990	2.6	12.3	4,665

Commonwealth member states

Country	Year joined	Population (millions)	GDP, 2023 (\$ billions)	GDP per head (\$)
 Nauru	1968	0.01	0.2	12,038
 New Zealand	1931	5.2	249.0	47,537
 Nigeria ⁴	1960	222.2	374.9	1,688
 Pakistan ⁵	1947	231.6	338.2	1,461
 Papua New Guinea	1975	12.3	31.0	2,525
 Rwanda	2009	13.5	14.0	1,039
 Samoa	1970	0.2	0.9	4,478
 Seychelles	1976	0.1	2.2	21,575
 Sierra Leone ⁶	1961	8.5	3.9	461
 Singapore	1965	5.9	501.4	84,734
 Solomon Islands	1978	0.7	1.6	2,205
 South Africa ⁷	1931	61.5	377.7	6,138
 Sri Lanka	1948	22.4	74.8	3,342
 St Kitts and Nevis	1983	0.0	1.1	22,366
 St Lucia	1979	0.2	2.5	13,546
 St Vincent and the Grenadines	1979	0.1	1.0	9,377
 Tanzania	1961	63.3	79.4	1,254
 Togo	2022	9.1	9.1	998
 Tonga	1970	0.1	0.5	5,488
 Trinidad and Tobago	1962	1.4	28.1	19,801
 Tuvalu	1978	0.0	0.1	5,723
 Uganda	1962	45.5	51.8	1,139
 Vanuatu	1980	0.3	1.2	3,501
 Zambia	1964	20.6	28.4	1,381

¹ Fiji originally joined the Commonwealth in 1970, before its membership lapsed in 1987. Fiji rejoined the Commonwealth in 1997 and was suspended between 2000-01 and 2009-14

² The Gambia withdrew from the Commonwealth in 2013, rejoining in 2018

³ The Maldives originally joined the Commonwealth in 1982, withdrew in 2016, before rejoining in 2020

⁴ Nigeria was suspended from the Commonwealth between 1995 and 1999

⁵ Pakistan withdrew from the Commonwealth in 1972, rejoining in 1989. Pakistan was suspended from the Commonwealth between 1999 and 2004

⁶ Sierra Leone was suspended from the Commonwealth between 1997 and 1998

⁷ South Africa withdrew from the Commonwealth in 1961, before being readmitted in 1994

Source: [Commonwealth Secretariat](#) and IMF, [World Economic Outlook database](#); flag images taken from <http://www.countryflags.com>

Since 1948, several countries have withdrawn their membership, seen their membership suspended, or have allowed their membership to lapse, while two countries have ceased to be members of the Commonwealth permanently.

- Ireland ceased to be a member of the Commonwealth following the passage of the 1949 Ireland Act.
- Zimbabwe was suspended from the Commonwealth in 2002 and withdrew in 2003.

In 2018, Zimbabwe applied to re-join the Commonwealth.⁵ This process is ongoing.

A delegation of the Commonwealth Secretariat visited Zimbabwe in November 2022, with Assistant Secretary-General Luis Franceschi saying, “Zimbabwe has made significant progress in its journey to re-join the Commonwealth family.”⁶

In response to a written question in April 2023, Andrew Mitchell, Minister of State in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office with responsibility for Africa and Development, stated the UK Government recognised “the value of having Zimbabwe back in the Commonwealth”, but re-entry “would need to be on the basis that Zimbabwe was meeting admission requirements and able to uphold the values and principles set out in the Commonwealth Charter.” The response goes on to state that Zimbabwe's forthcoming general elections “...present a clear opportunity for the Government to demonstrate progress against the principles of the Charter, namely respect for human rights and freedom for the political opposition, civil society and media to operate.”⁷

In a statement following Zimbabwe's elections, held on 23rd and 24th August 2023, Mitchell stated the “pre-election environment and election day fell short of regional and international standards... we are concerned by a lack of transparency in the tallying of results, as well as the arrests of domestic observers.”⁸

A statement by the Commonwealth Observers Group said the elections were “well conducted and peaceful”, though the group “raised a number of issues that could impact on the credibility, transparency and inclusivity of the process.”⁹

⁵ The Commonwealth, [Zimbabwe begins process to re-join Commonwealth: observers invited to July elections](#), 21 May 2018

⁶ The Commonwealth, [Conclusion of the Commonwealth Mission to Zimbabwe](#), 17 November 2022

⁷ Question for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office: [Zimbabwe: Commonwealth: UIN 180444](#), answered on 24 April 2023. See also House of Lords Library, [The Commonwealth: Zimbabwe's return?](#) 9 January 2023

⁸ Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and The Rt Hon Andrew Mitchell MP, [Zimbabwe election 2023: UK Minister for Africa's statement](#), 31 August 2023

⁹ Commonwealth Secretariat [Commonwealth Observers release Interim Statement on Zimbabwe elections](#), 26 August 2023

3

Trade in 2023: an overview

In 2023:

- The UK exported £89 billion of goods and services to Commonwealth member states. This was equal to 10% of UK exports.
- Goods and services imports from Commonwealth member states were worth £75 billion. This was equal to 8% of the UK’s imports.
- The Commonwealth accounted for 9% of UK goods exports and 11% of services exports.
- 6% of the UK’s imported goods and 12% of imported services were imported from Commonwealth member states.

UK trade with Commonwealth countries, 2023

Goods and services

	Exports		Imports		Balance £ billions
	£ billions	% total	£ billions	% total	
Goods	35.6	39.9%	36.1	48.3%	-0.5
Services	53.6	60.1%	38.7	51.7%	14.9
Total	89.1	100.0%	74.8	100.0%	14.3

Source: ONS, [UK total trade: all countries, seasonally adjusted](#)

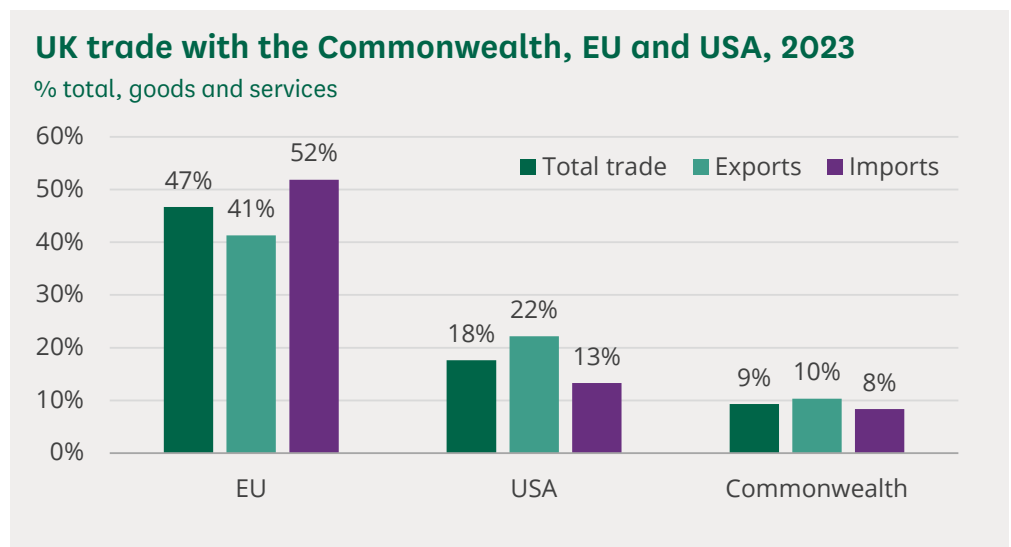
The UK recorded an overall trade surplus with Commonwealth member states of £14 billion - a trade deficit in goods of £0.5 billion was outweighed by a trade surplus in services of £15 billion.



Source: ONS, [UK total trade: all countries, seasonally adjusted](#)

3.1 International context

Taken as a bloc, the EU is the UK’s largest export market and source of imports – the value of UK exports to the EU were over four times greater than exports to the Commonwealth, while the value of imports from the EU were around six times greater than UK imports from the Commonwealth.



Source: ONS, [UK total trade: all countries, seasonally adjusted](#)

UK exports to the EU represented 41% of all UK exports in 2023 (down from a high of 54% in 2006); imports from the EU represented 52% of all UK imports (down from a high of 58% in 2003).

Looking at individual countries, the USA is the UK's largest export market and largest source of imports. In 2023, the USA accounted for 22% of UK exports and 13% of all UK imports.

3.2 Trade with individual Commonwealth countries

Canada was the UK largest export market in 2023, accounting for just under a fifth of UK exports of goods and services to the Commonwealth.

- Canada was the UK's largest Commonwealth export market for goods, accounting for 20% of UK goods exports to the Commonwealth.
- Canada was the UK's and second largest Commonwealth export market for services (behind India) accounting for 17% of UK service exports to the Commonwealth.

UK, 10 largest Commonwealth export markets			
Goods and services, 2023			
	£ billions	% C'wealth	% world
Canada	16.5	18.5%	2.0%
India	15.8	17.8%	1.9%
Singapore	14.9	16.7%	1.8%
Australia	14.6	16.4%	1.8%
South Africa	4.6	5.2%	0.6%
Nigeria	4.2	4.8%	0.5%
Malaysia	3.4	3.8%	0.4%
New Zealand	2.1	2.3%	0.3%
Cyprus	2.0	2.3%	0.2%
Pakistan	1.8	2.0%	0.2%
Total C'wealth	89.1	100.0%	9.6%

Source: ONS, [UK total trade: all countries, seasonally adjusted](#)

India was the UK's largest source of imports goods and services from the Commonwealth, accounting for just under a third of UK imports from the Commonwealth.

- India was the UK's largest source of imported goods from the Commonwealth, accounting for 27% of the UK's Commonwealth goods imports.
- India was also the UK's largest source of imported services from the Commonwealth, accounting for 35% of the UK's Commonwealth services imports.

UK, 10 largest sources of Commonwealth imports			
Goods and services, 2023			
	£ billions	% C'wealth	% world
India	23.2	31.0%	2.6%
Canada	9.8	13.1%	1.1%
Singapore	7.4	9.9%	0.8%
South Africa	5.8	7.8%	0.6%
Australia	5.4	7.2%	0.6%
Nigeria	2.8	3.8%	0.3%
Bangladesh	2.8	3.7%	0.3%
Pakistan	2.4	3.1%	0.3%
Malaysia	2.3	3.1%	0.3%
Cyprus	1.7	2.2%	0.2%
Total C'wealth	74.8	100.0%	8.3%

Source: ONS, [UK total trade: all countries, seasonally adjusted](#)

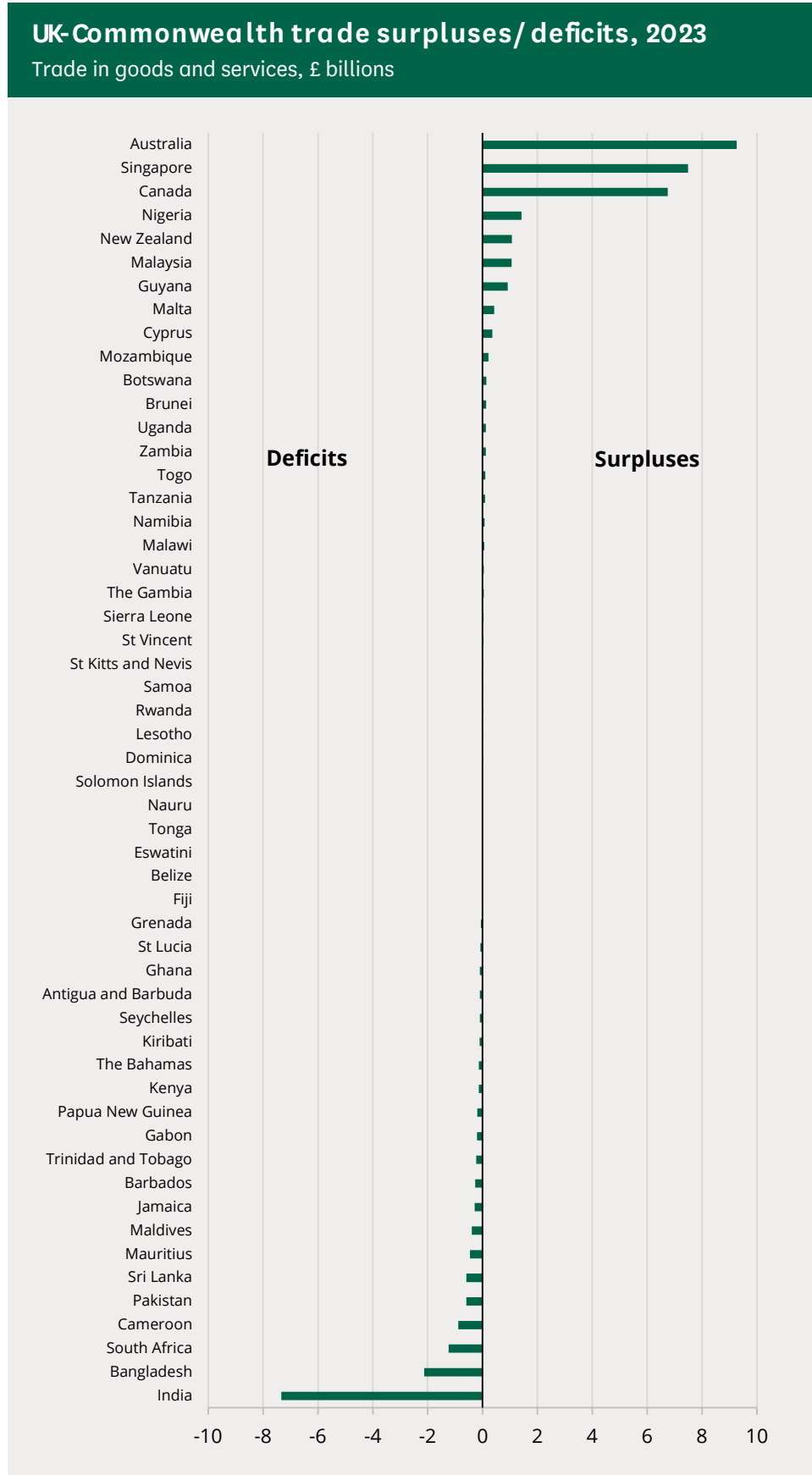
In general, UK trade with the Commonwealth is heavily concentrated on a small number of countries – Australia, Canada, India, Singapore and South Africa. Combined, these five countries accounted for 75% of UK exports to the Commonwealth in 2023 and 69% of UK imports from the Commonwealth.

3.3

Balance of trade

The graph below shows UK trade with 54 of the 55 other Commonwealth member states in 2023 - data are not available for Tuvalu.

- The UK had a trade surplus with 29 of these countries and a deficit with 25.
- The UK's largest Commonwealth trade surplus was with Australia and was worth £9 billion, followed by Singapore (£7 billion) and Canada (£7 billion).
- The UK's largest Commonwealth trade deficit was with India and was worth £7 billion, followed by Bangladesh (£2 billion) and South Africa (£1 billion).



Source: ONS, [UK total trade: all countries, seasonally adjusted](#)

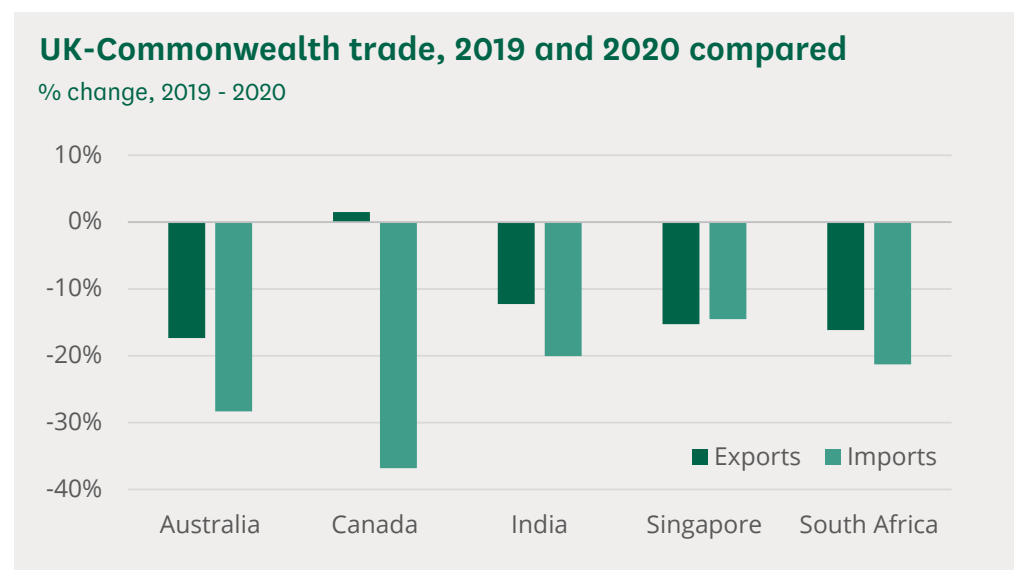
4 Trends in UK-Commonwealth trade

Data on UK trade with Commonwealth member states is published in current prices (i.e., not adjusted for inflation). The lack of inflation adjustment is significant given recent high rates of inflation and should be borne in mind when interpreting the figures below.

The value of the UK’s trade with the Commonwealth has generally increased since 1999, the longest period for which comparable data are available. Notable exceptions to this trend have been:

- Between 2008 and 2009, when trade contracted as a result of the global financial crisis – the value of UK exports to the Commonwealth fell by 2% in cash terms, while the value of imports from the Commonwealth fell by 4%
- Between 2019 and 2020, when trade contracted as a result of the fall in international trade caused by the coronavirus pandemic – the value of UK exports to the Commonwealth fell by 11% in cash terms, while the value of imports from the Commonwealth fell by 25%.

The fall in UK trade with the Commonwealth in 2020 was more pronounced in terms of UK imports from the Commonwealth than exports to the Commonwealth countries and was particularly notable in imports from a small number of Commonwealth countries - Australia, Canada, India, Singapore and South Africa. Between 2019 and 2020, the value of UK exports to these five countries fell by 11%, while the value of imports from these countries fell by 25%.



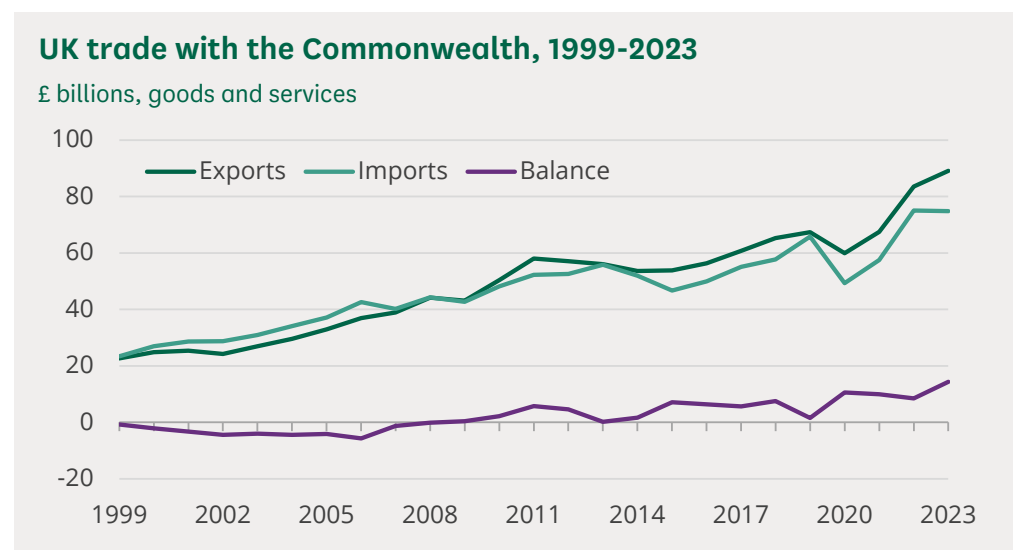
Source: ONS, [UK total trade: all countries, seasonally adjusted](#)

The total value of UK trade with the Commonwealth increased in 2021, but remained below 2019 levels.

The value of UK trade with the Commonwealth reached a record high in cash terms in 2022, as UK exports to the Commonwealth increased by 23% in cash terms between 2021 and 2022, while the value of imports from the Commonwealth increased by 30%.

The value of UK exports to the Commonwealth were 32% higher in cash terms in 2023 compared to 2019, while the value of imports from the Commonwealth were 14% higher.

Note, these figures do not adjust for inflation which was around 9% in the UK in 2022 and 7% in 2023, and also represent a return to a more ‘normal’ level of trade, following Covid.

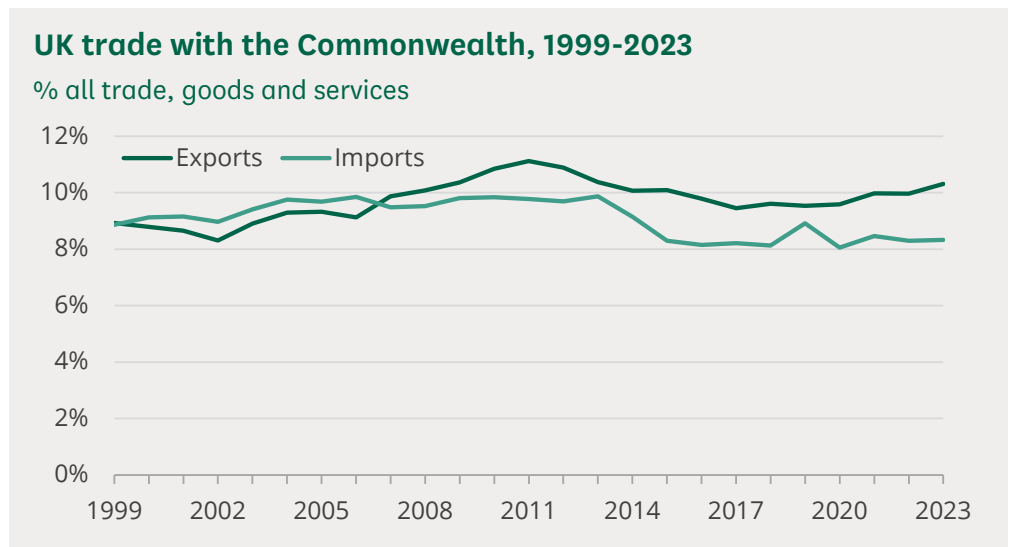


Source: ONS, [UK total trade: all countries, seasonally adjusted](#)

The UK has now recorded an overall trade surplus with the Commonwealth every year since 2009 – the UK has recorded a trade deficit in goods and a trade surplus in services with the Commonwealth every year since 1999 (the longest period for which comparable data is available). Since 2009, the value of the UK’s trade surplus in services with the Commonwealth has outweighed the value of the UK’s trade deficit in goods.

The UK’s largest overall trade surplus with the Commonwealth over this period was £14 billion in 2023.

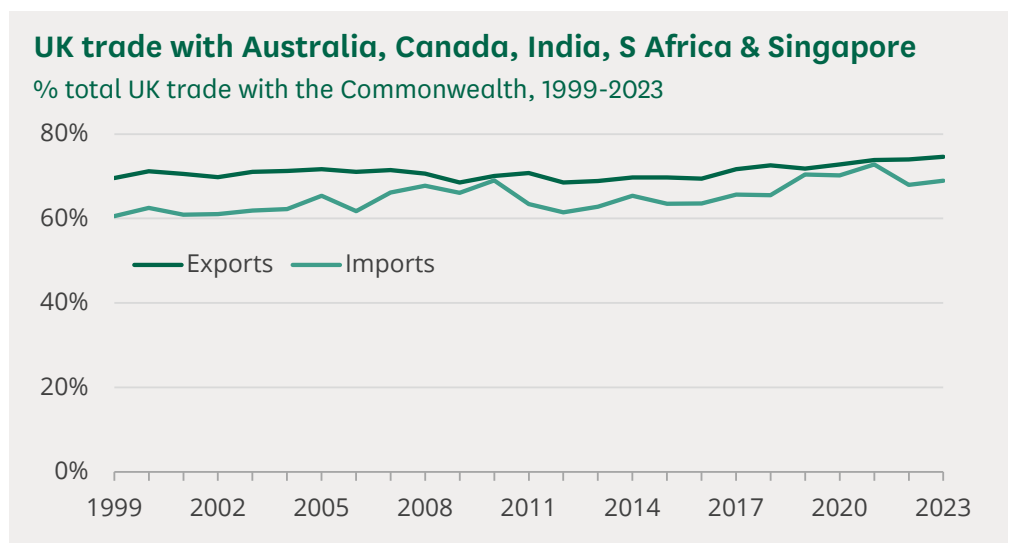
The proportion of the UK’s total exports going to the Commonwealth has fallen slightly over the last decade or so, from a high of 11.1% in 2011 to 10.3% in 2023. Similarly, the proportion of UK imports total coming from the Commonwealth has fallen slightly, from a high of 9.9% in 2013 to 8.3% in 2023.



Source: ONS, [UK total trade: all countries, seasonally adjusted](#)

Combined, Australia, Canada, India, Singapore and South Africa accounted for 72% of the UK’s total trade with Commonwealth in 2023 (i.e., the combined value of exports and imports), up from 71% in 2022.

These five countries have accounted for a consistently high share of UK trade with the Commonwealth over the last 20 years, increasing from 65% in 1999 to a high of 73% in 2021.



Source: ONS, [UK total trade: all countries, seasonally adjusted](#)

5 UK trade with the Commonwealth, 1999-2023

UK trade with the Commonwealth, 1999-2023					
Goods and services					
	Exports		Imports		Balance
	£ billion	% of total	£ billion	% of total	£ billion
1999	22.6	8.9%	23.4	8.9%	-0.8
2000	24.8	8.8%	27.0	9.1%	-2.2
2001	25.3	8.7%	28.6	9.2%	-3.3
2002	24.3	8.3%	28.7	9.0%	-4.4
2003	27.0	8.9%	31.0	9.4%	-4.0
2004	29.6	9.3%	34.0	9.8%	-4.5
2005	32.9	9.3%	37.1	9.7%	-4.1
2006	36.9	9.1%	42.6	9.8%	-5.7
2007	38.9	9.9%	40.2	9.5%	-1.3
2008	44.2	10.1%	44.3	9.5%	-0.1
2009	43.1	10.4%	42.7	9.8%	0.4
2010	50.3	10.8%	48.1	9.8%	2.2
2011	58.0	11.1%	52.3	9.8%	5.8
2012	57.1	10.9%	52.5	9.7%	4.6
2013	56.0	10.4%	55.8	9.9%	0.2
2014	53.6	10.1%	52.0	9.1%	1.6
2015	53.8	10.1%	46.7	8.3%	7.2
2016	56.3	9.8%	50.0	8.1%	6.4
2017	60.8	9.4%	55.1	8.2%	5.6
2018	65.3	9.6%	57.7	8.1%	7.6
2019	67.4	9.5%	65.8	8.9%	1.6
2020	59.9	9.6%	49.3	8.1%	10.6
2021	67.5	10.0%	57.5	8.5%	10.0
2022	83.5	10.0%	75.0	8.3%	8.5
2023	89.1	10.3%	74.8	8.3%	14.3

Source: ONS, [UK total trade: all countries, seasonally adjusted](#)

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