



SME EXPORT TASKFORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

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Federation of
Small Businesses

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WHO WE ARE

The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) is the UK's grassroots business organisation. We are a cross-party non-profit body that represents small business and self-employed members in every nation and region.

For 50 years, we have been the authoritative voice on policy issues affecting the UK's 5.5 million small businesses, microbusinesses and the self-employed. FSB is the UK's largest business group and leading business campaigner, focused on achieving change which supports smaller businesses to grow and succeed.

We also provide our members with a wide range of vital business services, helping them to start, run, and grow successful businesses through high quality protection and support. This includes 24/7 legal support, financial expertise, training and events, debt recovery and employment/HR advice – alongside a powerful voice heard by governments at all levels.

Our local, national and international activism helps shape policy decisions that have a direct impact on the day-to-day running of smaller businesses. We work for their interests through research and engagement with our members and by effective campaigning - influencing those in power through policy analysis, public affairs, media and public relations activity.

Our policy and advocacy work starts with our expert team in Westminster, which focuses on UK and England policy issues, the UK Government, Parliament and the media. Further to this, our teams in Glasgow, Cardiff and Belfast work with governments, elected representatives and media in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

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BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

SME Export Taskforce: 5 priorities to increase SME exports

In Autumn 2023 the Labour Party invited the Federation of Small Businesses to lead and run an SME Export Taskforce, convening key businesses and organisations to put forward a set of fresh policy recommendations for the next UK Government that would secure a measurable increase in the number of UK SMEs exporting. The recommendations are actions that the UK Government has the power to undertake on its own – and so are in addition to its negotiating positions on the review of the Trade and Co-operation Agreement with the EU due in early 2026, and any prospective trade deal with other nations.

In roundtable sessions held between January and March 2024, the SME Export Taskforce brought together SMEs, finance providers, large corporates and business associations across the UK economy. Participants shared their experiences of international trade and ideas on improving the exporting journey for SMEs, proposals that were then tested and finessed into this document. The resulting recommendations fall into five priority areas which reflect the challenges, opportunities and suggestions raised throughout these sessions. We are grateful to the individuals and businesses who generously shared their time and expertise with the Taskforce, all of whom provided invaluable contributions.

THE CHALLENGE

The growth opportunities for the UK economy from SME exports are huge. SMEs that export are more likely to grow – and more quickly – and be more resilient in times of economic difficulty than those that do not. There is also clear benefit to the UK for our SMEs to tap into economies that are rapidly growing, when the domestic economy is facing greater challenges. But with just over 10% of SMEs across the UK putting their products and services to market overseas, according to Department for Business and Trade, the UK is not yet reaching its full potential.

The challenges and barriers identified by the Taskforce indicated a tendency towards a non-strategic approach to international trade among many of the UK's SMEs and within historic Government policy, leading to:

- A regulatory and policy environment that should do more to remove burdens on SMEs.
- A government export support offering that can be difficult to navigate and may not always meet SME needs.
- Low numbers of SMEs with export potential participating in international trade, and an ad hoc rather than strategic approach to exports among those that do.

The Taskforce is positive that with the right approach to policy and support, many more SMEs can be empowered to start or increase their trade activity. A holistic approach that creates the right environment for international trade is needed, including recognition of how Government and a diverse private sector can complement each other to deliver the best possible conditions.

FIVE EXPORT PRIORITIES

To supercharge SME exporting, the Taskforce recommends:

- 1. A cross-Whitehall approach to policy:** Embedding trade across all relevant government departments, from a 'quality-not-quantity' approach to Free Trade Agreements to an international competitiveness 'filter' applied to policy design.
- 2. An open relationship with business:** An open, honest, and two-way approach to shaping legislation and trade deals and delivering Government guidance effectively.
- 3. Global leadership on digital trade:** Leading the way on delivering the benefits of paperless trading across the whole supply chain.
- 4. Open to export from day one:** Delivering a robust export support offering that meets SME needs and tackling attitudinal barriers to trade.
- 5. Addressing the finance gap:** Improving SME access trade finance and reducing the financial barriers to trade.

MEASURING SUCCESS

A national target for the overall value of UK exports risks masking the impact of new measures on SMEs' export activity. As such, the Taskforce recommends that instead there should be a Government commitment to grow both the proportion of UK SMEs that export and the volume or value of overall UK exports attributable to SMEs. The success of these targets could be measured using the ONS Annual Business Survey together with qualitative and quantitative evidence from FSB and other organisations that undertake trade/sentiment surveys of their membership.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A cross-Whitehall approach to policy

Mainstream trade policy and export promotion across relevant Government departments to create a pro-exporting regulatory environment.

- Export and domestic economic targets should be developed, agreed and published together. There should be more long-term and cross-departmental thinking around trade policy and a consistent approach to the support that lies underneath it, allowing all relevant Departments to work towards a shared coherent strategy and goals.
- All relevant Departments should be encouraged to include, or consult with, trade policy specialists in the development of all domestic policy that impacts business. The Government should include trade in its approach to industrial policy the importance of trade to unlocking future growth.
- All relevant Departments should develop their own trade knowledge/capacity in order to participate more fully in trade negotiations, undertake export promotion and Free Trade Agreement (FTA) utilisation. This could include cross-departmental taskforces/ working groups to provide expertise to trade negotiators.
- UK Ambassadors and High Commissioners overseas should be given greater responsibility for promoting UK SME trade and helping them to reach new markets. Economic diplomacy, using our 'soft power', must be a core part of the training programme for diplomatic staff.
- SMEs would benefit from easier access to in-market expertise and assistance provided by Department for Business and Trade (DBT) country staff, Trade Commissioners and attaché networks. Businesses should be able to reach out to in-market officials directly, such as being able to contact attachés or signing up with individual embassies to receive information about relevant opportunities. In-country officials could also be given a more proactive role in providing information on or recommending potential suppliers or distributors to exporting businesses.
- More open access to HMRC trade and customs data across relevant Whitehall departments and the devolved administrations would allow for more accurate reporting and enable better targeting of resources and policy.
- UK Government should also increase engagement with the Northern Ireland Executive, Scottish Government and Welsh Government and economic development agencies to complement their existing trade promotion activities.

Managing the effect of regulation on SME exports

- Divergence between UK and EU regulatory requirements may generate additional administrative and financial costs for exporters, particularly SMEs. Governments should seek to minimise or mitigate these barriers to trade through the following:
- Ongoing monitoring of SMEs' experiences and the support they may need to navigate changing regulatory requirements. This should include continual UK Government engagement with the small business community across all parts of the UK on the implementation of requirements under the Windsor Framework, in partnership with the Northern Ireland Executive.
- The UK should commit to reaching mutual recognition agreements and Memoranda of Understanding to reduce administrative and technical barriers to trade for critical sectors or industries within, and separately from, Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations.
- The UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement Domestic Advisory Group structure provides a model for highlighting and resolving trade barriers and could be mirrored into FTA governance for other agreements.
- The remit of the Department for Business and Trade's FTA Utilisation team should be expanded to include export promotion to additional markets, including those markets with agreements other than FTAs.
- Innovative approaches to labelling/provision of information may ease SME compliance with administrative burdens while satisfying legal requirements.
- Enhanced inter-regulator cooperation will reduce business burdens and work towards greater harmonisation at international level.
- A free but managed regime for product samples should be adopted as a primary goal with key trade partners, allowing SMEs to send product samples to prospective customers without applying customs duties and with SPS exemptions for trusted traders.

An open relationship with business

Transparency should be a central principle of the UK's approach to trade negotiations.

- Extensive consultation with stakeholders from beginning to end of the FTA process should be complemented with greater openness before, throughout and after negotiations, including increased transparency around Government priorities and negotiating approaches, and engaging with industry to understand priority markets. The Department for Business and Trade should commit to greater visibility of negotiating mandates and documents under rigorous confidentiality agreements with business stakeholders.

Shape policy in consultation with, and deliver information to, the SME community through an open, honest and two-way approach to communication.

- A Senior Exports Council comprised of business representative organisations and sector-leading firms, representing both goods and services, should be announced in the first 100 days of a new Government to provide strategic direction. It is vital that membership comprises strong small business representation and represents the length and breadth of the UK business community.
- Trade and export information and advice services should mix delivery from Government officials and business experts, including facilitating peer-to-peer learning. The networks of representative organisations and the private sector should be leveraged to disseminate messaging or support to businesses.
- Elected officials should be encouraged to spend more time outside Whitehall, visiting SMEs and attending relevant tradeshows to clearly reinforce their commitment to helping and understanding of SMEs.

Global leadership on digital trade

Help SMEs to adopt digitalisation of trade processes while continuing to embrace and advocate for digital trade.

- The UK should use new trade agreements to secure commitments from trade partners to recognise the Electronic Trade Documents Act and adopt equivalent measures. Other critical measures to promote digital trade include commitments to uphold the cross-border flow of data without compromising data protection standards and the banning of unjustified data localisation in bilateral trade agreements where possible, as well as promoting regulatory cooperation and sharing of best practice.
- Delivering an effective Single Trade Window for SMEs that removes duplication, protects commercial data and increases trade flow transparency for traders is critical. The STW must also be able to interact with other Single Windows globally to simplify SMEs' exporting experiences.
- Existing initiatives such as the Export Academy should be adapted to include modules on how to build digitisation, including automation, into their trade activity. Government engagement and support is also vital to helping SMEs adopt electronic trade documents.
- The UK Government should support the E-Commerce Trade Commission, International Chamber of Commerce and Centre for Digital Trade and Innovation in their priorities to accelerate trade digitalisation and increase export participation amongst the UK business community through active participation of relevant officials and implementation of their recommendations to boost SME exports.
- The UK should continue to contribute to and lead efforts in multilateral fora such as the World Trade Organisation to build support for the growing MSME agenda and digital trade, including maintaining the moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions.

Open to export from day one

A more strategic approach to Government trade support is needed to generate a similarly strategic approach to exporting in businesses.

- Export support delivery teams in the civil service should work with partners such as the British Business Bank and Princes Trust to include exporting/international trade in 'starting a business' resources, including start-up loans and business plan templates, to encourage businesses to see exports as an integral part of business growth.
- An assessment of existing initiatives is needed to determine their effectiveness, decide whether Government or the private sector is best placed to deliver each initiative, and to remove duplication and lower-quality support. This should become an ongoing evaluation process of constant improvement, leading to a more positive and consistent approach to delivery. Support should also take into account and be tailored to the various means SMEs use to carry out trade activities, including the growing role of e-commerce in enabling SME participation in trade.
- Better delivery of trade and market information to UK businesses seeking to export is as critical as the content of the support. This should include improving, streamlining, evolving or replacing GREAT.gov.uk. Ongoing monitoring and updating of the Help to Grow site as needed would also be welcome. Additional promotion of the WTO Global Support Helpdesk and/or private sector support offers may complement UK-level initiatives.
- There is consensus around the need to review and improve the International Trade Advisor network, through introducing accreditation for ITAs. Above all this minimum standard of delivery should see businesses being matched with advisors that have sector-specific expertise.
- Better communication to SMEs around Government-sponsored trade priorities and delegations to tradeshows is critical. Businesses need a comprehensive, 6-month programme for each event, with a clear forward calendar of upcoming tradeshows/ delegations, early dissemination of information and robust post-mission follow up.
- Because exports are in part enabled by imports, more support is also needed for importers, such as guidance on the administration of import quotas agreed with FTA partners.
- Small business chapters should be included as standard in all UK Free Trade Agreements, and should be complemented by clear guidance to help businesses take advantage of the opportunities available to them.

Addressing the finance gap

Help those SMEs with export potential that are unable to meet the upfront costs of trade to begin or expand their export journeys.

- Access to trade finance is critical for SMEs to meet the upfront costs of trade and address cashflow shortages for those with small margins and minimal resources. There is a range of financial, insurance and brokerage products and services available for SMEs from grants to guarantee schemes, from many sources including UK Export Finance (UKEF) and the British Business Bank as well as the private sector. A joined up approach between Government, industry and relevant finance providers is important to increase SMEs awareness and uptake of trade finance products, who struggle with the current complicated and fragmented trade finance offering.
- UKEF is a significant potential source of trade finance and its increasing focus on, and engagement with, SMEs is welcome. A new Government provides an opportunity to transform UKEF's offer to SMEs. To that end, Ministers from the Department for Business and Trade should chair a working group comprised of UKEF, SMEs and the banking sector to report on the development of more suitable products for SMEs dealing in lower-value shipments.
- Government should introduce an Export Development Grant Scheme for micro businesses, akin to the successful scheme deployed in Australia for decades, which has incentivised scores of SMEs to export their products to new markets.
- The ongoing review of the pilot UK Tradeshow Programme should be concluded and put forward new financial support to SMEs to attend tradeshows in overseas markets.

ANNEX: GLOBAL MODELS TO EXPLORE

Mainstreaming trade policy

There are close links in many countries between trade and areas such as innovation, R&D and skills policies (e.g. Australia, Ireland, Netherlands), whilst some integrate trade into cross-government efforts to boost productivity (Denmark). Trade promotion is likewise a cross-departmental strategy for many (Sweden/France/US) and often, trade promotion authorities work closely with other government departments to provide input into overall regulatory policy – for example Enterprise International Singapore is empowered to advise its Government on trade and regulation by statute.

USA: The Department of Commerce and Department of State complement the US Trade Representative with their own responsibilities for commercial diplomacy. Multiple departments play a role in export promotion, including the Foreign Agricultural Service of the Department of Agriculture, the Small Business Administration, the US Trade and Development Agency.¹ These agencies participate in the Trade Promotion Coordinating Committee, a cross-departmental taskforce chaired by the Secretary of Commerce. Similarly, trade negotiations are led by USTR, but over 20 executive agencies from other departments have responsibility for trade policy.

Mexico: Mexico introduced a trade filter to its regulatory impact assessment process, embedding trade impacts from the outset of the process through a series of questions which aim to assess whether draft proposals will impact foreign trade.² If potential impact on trade is identified, a specific trade impact assessment is conducted.

France: Ambassadors spend ‘more than a third of their time’ on promoting French economic interests³ and work closely with Business France to coordinate overseas activities. The French Foreign Ministry has created an Economic Diplomacy Directorate to support these efforts, and diplomat training includes a focus on economic and trade diplomacy.

Denmark: Many embassies support Danish businesses to enter new markets through helping them reach potential customers, drawing up a potential list of distributors or partners, or mapping potential competitors.⁴

1 <https://www.export.gov/federal-partners>

2 https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5466670&fecha=22/12/2016#gsc.tab=0

3 <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/economic-diplomacy-foreign-trade/news/article/economic-diplomacy>

4 <https://thetradecouncil.dk/en/services/export/use-diplomacy>

Minimising the impact of regulatory divergence and trade facilitation

Mutual Recognition Agreements: The EU has mutual recognition agreements with 7 non-EU jurisdictions (Australia, Canada, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Switzerland and the USA) which facilitate conformity assessment in specific sectors.⁵ Australia and New Zealand share the Trans-Tasman Mutual Recognition Agreement, under which people registered to practise an occupation in one of the Parties can register to practise an equivalent occupation in the other, and goods that can legally be sold in one territory can be sold in the other.⁶

Domestic Advisory Groups: Most EU Free Trade Agreements include provision for a consultative Domestic Advisory Group to be set up by each of the partners to advise on the implementation of the agreement, submit opinions and make recommendations. The DAG structure comprises business organisations, trade unions and other organisations.⁷

Creative approaches to labelling: The EU permits information about some products (such as food, drink, tyres, batteries, fertilisers and some medicinal products) to be provided via digital labelling. The EU is also introducing a Digital Product Passport to increase supply chain transparency and product traceability. The proposal falls under the EU's sustainability goals but the principle could be explored as means to facilitate compliance.

Regulator to regulator cooperation: Inter-regulator cooperation is embedded in Canada's regulatory framework via the Canadian Cabinet Directive on Regulation which requires regulators to assess opportunities for alignment with other jurisdictions.⁸ The UK-Japan Free Trade Agreement is a good example of how regulatory dialogue can be embedded into trade agreements (Annex 8-A on regulatory cooperation in financial services).⁹

The European Union General Data Protection Regulation includes the 'one stop shop' principle, whereby a lead Data Protection Authority conducts investigations into cross-border cases, cooperating with other concerned Authorities to reach consensus on a final decision.

Trade samples: In New Zealand, trade samples that are supplied free of charge outside of the country are exempt from requirements to lodge an export entry and may be admitted duty free. An Electronic Cargo Entry must be lodged, giving Customs a summary of the item being imported or exported. Certifications/licences may still be required (e.g. food products).¹⁰

5 https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/single-market/goods/international-aspects-single-market/mutual-recognition-agreements_en

6 <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/business-and-employment/business/trade-and-tariffs/trade-agreements-and-partnerships/closer-economic-relations-with-australia-and-the-trans-tasman-mutual-recognition-arrangement/>

7 https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/transparency-eu-trade-negotiations/domestic-advisory-groups_en

8 <https://www.canada.ca/en/government/system/laws/developing-improving-federal-regulations/requirements-developing-managing-reviewing-regulations/guidelines-tools/cabinet-directive-regulation.html>

9 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f92eee8e90e077b054f58c6/CS_Japan_1.2020_UK_Japan_Agreement_Comprehensive_Economic_Partnership__v3.pdf

10 <https://www.business.govt.nz/risks-and-operations/manufacturing/importing-and-exporting-laws>

Samples of no commercial value may be imported duty-free to Singapore provided they are under a certain value threshold. Some goods may be eligible for exemption from an import permit.¹¹

Food products imported to Vietnam are exempted from food safety inspections if they are to be used as samples in e.g. trade fairs or exhibitions.¹²

Business-Government engagement, including FTA negotiations

Australia: The Trade 2040 Taskforce brings together government, industry, unions and community representatives to exchange views and provide advice to Government on trade and investment policy, trade promotion and Australia's participation in FTA negotiations.¹³

EU: The European Commission has committed to publishing its recommendations for negotiating directives for its FTA negotiations, and to publishing concluded texts before the legal scrubbing and ratification processes begin.¹⁴

New Zealand: The Foreign Affairs & Trade Department website has a section dedicated to FTAs that are in force, concluded, and under negotiation.¹⁵ The Department has a dedicated outreach mailbox and organises a series of public meetings for the public to discuss FTAs, ask questions and share views which are reported to Ministers.¹⁶

Canada: Following adoption of the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, the Canadian Government adopted a dedicated promotion strategy to raise stakeholder awareness including a regional promotional roadshow and training workshops. The majority of participants reported increased knowledge as a direct result.¹⁷

USA: The USA has a formal (statutory-based) business engagement structure. The US Trade Advisory Committee System is jointly managed by USTR and the relevant Departments and comprises over 20 advisory committees: the President's Advisory Committee (CEOs/ business leaders from key sectors); 5 Policy Advisory Committees; and 20 technical committees. Technical committee members are experts appointed for a four-year term, following a nationwide application process, on the basis of individual expertise and diversity of business representation. Members undergo background checks and sign confidentiality agreements, allowing USTR to share detail with trusted experts and enabling open discussion. Stakeholders are consulted continually, including before negotiations start and between rounds, on objectives and bargaining positions.

11 <https://customs.gov.sg/businesses/importing-goods/import-procedures/importing-trade-samples/#:~:text=Total%20CIF%20value%20not%20exceeding,%24400%3A%20These%20samples%20incur%20GST.>

12 <https://lawnet.vn/thong-tin-phap-luat/en/chinh-sach-moi/19-cases-exempted-from-the-quality-and-food-safety-inspections-in-vietnam-107599.html>

13 <https://www.dfat.gov.au/trade/trade-and-investment/trade-2040-taskforce>

14 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52017DC0491>

15 <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/trade/free-trade-agreements/>

16 <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/trade/nz-trade-policy/public-engagement-on-trade/>

17 <https://www.international.gc.ca/gac-amc/publications/audits-verification/2018/audit-tcs-sdc.aspx?lang=eng>

Paperless trade

Singapore: Singapore has signed a series of Digital Economy Agreements, including with the UK. These agreements commit signatories to facilitate cross-border digitalisation, including improving interoperability between digital systems, strengthening the infrastructure for paperless trade and encouraging e-payments.¹⁸

Export support

EU: Access2Markets provides EU businesses with up to date information on tariffs and taxes, trade processes, product requirements and guidance on rules of origin, and more, covering all EU27 countries and over 100 non-EU markets.

WTO & others: The Global Trade Helpdesk, a multi-agency initiative, is a single online portal for businesses to explore potential markets, tariffs and market access conditions, navigate export/import processes and find potential business partners.

New Zealand: The Foreign Affairs & Trade Department website has a section containing comprehensive information for businesses on how to use existing FTAs,¹⁹ and a single landing page for businesses that signposts to Government resources.²⁰

Private sector solutions: There are many private sector functions that can support SMEs throughout their export journey, from understanding regulations and tariffs to identifying customs brokers and dealing with VAT. These include, among others, offerings from high street banks and online platforms.

Export finance

Australia: The Export Market Development Grants provide grants for expenses for eligible activities such as producing promotional material, providing free samples, engaging a market research consultant and business travel. SME exporters may apply for grants over 8 years in total (not necessarily consecutively).²¹

Canada: The CanExport SMEs programme provides up to \$50,000 to SMEs registered in Canada for international business development activities including market research, buying expert advice, translation costs, attending trade shows virtually or in person, and applying for certification in overseas markets.²² The Canada Pavilion Program helps businesses attend global food and beverage tradeshows, providing funding to offset the direct cost of exhibiting (booth prices) at eligible tradeshows. It is open to all businesses but gives priority to SMEs and first-time exhibitors. Registration opens within six months of the show date.²³

18 <https://www.mti.gov.sg/Trade/Digital-Economy-Agreements>

19 <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/trade/free-trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements-in-force/new-zealand-united-kingdom-free-trade-agreement/using-the-agreement/>

20 <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/trade/how-we-help-exporters/>

21 <https://www.austrade.gov.au/en/how-we-can-help-you/grants/export-market-development-grants>

22 <https://www.tradecommissioner.gc.ca/funding-financement/canexport/sme-pme/index.aspx?lang=eng>

23 <https://agriculture.canada.ca/en/international-trade/trade-show-service/canada-pavilion-program/trade-show-applicant-guide-canada-pavilion-program>

Netherlands: Eligible SMEs can apply for a subsidy covering 50% of expenses up to €2,500 of tradeshow participation (not including travel and accommodation). Businesses may receive up to 2 grants in consecutive years for the same tradeshow, and businesses may apply for multiple different tradeshows, up to a total of €6,500 per year.²⁴

²⁴ <https://english.rvo.nl/subsidies-financing/sib/individual-trade-fair-participation>

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