Article

Developing UK digital trade statistics: 2026 update

Summary of methods to measure digital trade, including experimental estimates of household spending on digitally ordered goods and services and aspects of digitally delivered services.

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1 . Overview

This article summarises methods developed to produce experimental and provisional estimates of digital trade, exploring the strengths and limitations of different data sources, and our plans for compiling complete estimates.

We outline our approach to capturing digitally ordered goods and services and digitally delivered services from UK businesses through the redevelopment of the Digital Economy Survey as the method to capture the largest proportion of digital trade. We also capture new and emerging industries, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and cloud computing, as defined in the recently published System of National Accounts 2025 and Balance of Payments and International Investment Position Manual Statistical frameworks (SNA2025/ BPM7) (PDF, 13.8MB).

Household digital trade cannot be captured via business survey. We define the methods we have developed following on from our Consumer card spending, e-commerce and digital trade insights in the UK statistics article, drawing insights from aggregated and anonymised data on UK cardholder payments and Bank of England (BoE) real-time gross settlement (RTGS) values, to estimate digitally ordered imports from UK households. We have estimated this to account for £50.5 billion, or 3.8%, of UK card spending by UK card holders in 2025.

Finally, we define methods to estimate Digital Intermediation Platform fees for short-term lets platforms utilising VisitBritain's UK short-term rentals insights and the Office for National Statistics's (ONS's) Short-term lets datasets to estimate UK guest and host fees. We estimate that UK users have paid £118 million in fees to short-term lets platforms in April 2026.

2 . Digital trade research

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) Handbook on Measuring Digital Trade, Second Edition, jointly produced with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), provides a framework for measuring digital trade. This consists of two central, overlapping definitions for digitally ordered and digitally delivered trade, see Section 5: Definitions for more detail.

This handbook also outlines a reporting template, setting out the different types of digital trade, as well as identifying the different economic influences, which has informed our research.

In 2022, we published initial research in our Developing digital trade statistics article, which outlined important development requirements for measuring digital trade. Additionally, the United Nations' (UN's) recently published System of National Accounts 2025 and Balance of Payments and International Investment Position Manual Statistical frameworks (SNA2025/ BPM7) (PDF, 13.8MB) provides new insights on the impact digitalisation has on national accounts.

3 . Measuring businesses’ digital trade activity

Businesses account for the majority of international trade, so it can be expected that the same is true for digital trade. However, the UK currently cannot separate digital trade by businesses from the international trade statistics it falls within. This detail is vital for multiple government departments, including the Department for Business and Trade, to inform trade negotiations and understand the e-commerce relationship the UK has with other countries.

Surveys are widely established to be the best source for statistics on business activity, where there is no administrative data, and incorporating digital trade questions into Information and communication technology (ICT) usage surveys is the approach recommended internationally in the handbook on measuring digital trade. The UK's ICT usage survey, our Digital Economy Survey, was the primary source of data for estimating digital trade flows by UK businesses. However, 2021 was the latest period of data collected as this survey was paused for rebuilding in 2023, because of data quality concerns.

An updated version of the Digital Economy Survey is being developed, which focuses on collecting economic values related to e-commerce and digital trade, as well as detail on artificial intelligence (AI), and other technologies that are the concern of the updated SNA2025/ BPM7 chapters on digitalisation (PDF, 13.8MB). In addition, novel methodologies for utilising existing data sources have been developed alongside the Digital Economy Survey to fill data gaps that will not be covered, such as digital trade imports by households, or to improve the quality or granularity of data in difficult-to-measure areas, such as digital intermediation platform fees. These datasets and methods are outlined in the following subsections.

Digitally ordered trade

Digitally ordered trade, or international e-commerce, refers to the sale of goods or services over computer networks from one country to another. The most recent data derived from our Digital Economy Survey show that UK businesses made around £77.8 billion in sales via their websites to customers based abroad in 2021, which equates to 11.4% of total trade in that year using the latest data from our UK total trade: all countries, seasonally adjusted, October-December 2025 dataset.

The OECD has developed two methods for deriving experimental estimates of digitally ordered trade. The "International e-commerce" approach takes total sales made over computer networks, or e-commerce (web sales and electronic data interchanges), by industry, and applies the proportion of sales in that industry that were made internationally. The latest available data for this method were produced in 2019, but the updated Digital Economy Survey results would allow us to produce estimates.

The "International trade" approach multiplies international trade exports by whole-economy e-commerce proportions, assuming that companies participate in e-commerce at the same rate as domestic e-commerce. This approach relies on high-quality, whole-economy level e-commerce data being available. These data are not currently available but will be estimated from the Digital Economy Survey results.

Digitally delivered trade

Digitally delivered trade, or ICT-enabled services, refers to any services delivered over the internet from one country to another, see Section 5: Definitions for more detail. This includes, but is not limited to, the delivery of services that are inherently digital in nature, such as cloud computing services or digital goods like software.

Supply by Mode 1 or "remote trade" can be also described as "digitally deliverable services", which is an alternative measure to digitally delivered services, see Section 5: Definitions for definitions related to modes of supply. However, there are differences between the two definitions, for example, digitally delivered services explicitly excludes delivery by telephone, so we aim to collect data on this type of trade in the updated digital economy survey.

We produce our Imports and exports of services by country, by modes of supply, UK dataset annually: see our Modes of supply methodology report for more information. At £166 billion, 55.3% of all services imports were made via Mode 1 in 2023, an increase of £23 billion from 2022. Exports via Mode 1 increased from £297 billion in 2022 up to £315 billion in 2023, accounting for 71.7% and 68.3% of all services exports, respectively. This shows that a statistically significant proportion of international trade in services is digitally deliverable.

Exploration of administrative sources

As survey data in this field are currently limited, we have extensively explored administrative data sources. We entered a data sharing agreement with Visa, providing us with data on card transactions, but this data source's coverage for business spending is limited, and so it is better suited as a source of information for household purchases over the internet, see Section 4: Measuring household digital trade activity for more information.

Another source we have investigated is HM Revenue and Customs's Digital services tax data (DST). This is a 2% tax applied to enterprises with over £500 million worldwide revenue and over £25 million revenue from UK users in any accounting period from the following digital services:

- online marketplaces
- search engines
- social media services

The DST inclusion criteria align with the definition of a digital intermediary platform (DIP), see Section 5: Definitions for more detail. Therefore, the DST forms a subset of DIP services provided to UK users and this data source provides a unique insight into the scale of DIP services provided to UK users over time. However, given the very high threshold for companies to be obligated to pay this tax, the coverage of the dataset is limited, so insights for the whole economy cannot easily be derived.

4 . Measuring household digital trade activity

Digitalisation has enabled households to engage directly with businesses based around the world. Household engagement in international trade is often done unknowingly, meaning it is hard to gather useful insights on household digital trade activity through surveys. Therefore, households' involvement in international trade is not fully captured in existing Office for National Statistics (ONS) trade statistics, with some exceptions, for example, audiovisual streaming, travel services, and gambling. To fill these gaps, we have developed methods to capture this household digital trade.

Digitally ordered imports using card payments data

The ONS has entered into an agreement with Visa to receive aggregated and anonymised data on UK cardholder payments. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) Handbook on measuring digital trade, Second edition suggests using card payments data as a tool for estimating digital trade, providing several case studies of organisations successfully filling evidence gaps, while acknowledging the limitations of this data source. We recently published analysis of these limitations in our Consumer card spending, e-commerce and digital trade insights in the UK: 2019 to 2025 article, which collates e-commerce and digital trade insights using card transactions data.

This dataset allows us to isolate "card-not-present" transactions, which are referred to as online card transactions. E-commerce, or digital ordering is different from card-not-present transactions in several important ways. For example, e-commerce is defined solely by the method of ordering rather than payment method, see Section 5: Definitions for further detail. Online transactions represent a substantial subset of e-commerce transactions and therefore these card data provide a proxy for digital ordering.

We can further filter the data to look only at transactions where the merchant's location is not in the UK and the cardholder's location is in the UK. We define this kind of transaction as international and online spend, or "digitally ordered imports".

As the Visa data represent only part of the card payments market in the UK, it is necessary to apply proportions derived from that dataset to total UK consumer card spending values. We have obtained total card spending data from the Bank of England (BoE) real-time gross settlement (RTGS) values for Visa Europe and Mastercard, which are reported on a net basis. While this source provides a more complete view of card spending, some card schemes, such as American Express, are excluded. This means that this estimate is still a subset of total UK household card spend.

Table 1: Digitally ordered imports account for an estimated £50.5bn of UK card spending in 2025
Bank of England net RTGS values (Note 3), household international and online spend share, statistics in development, 2019 to 2025 (Note 2)

Year	Bank of England RTGS Values (£bn)	International and Online Spend Ratio (%)	Household Digitally Ordered Imports (£bn)
2019	862.5	4.9%	42.3
2020	866.7	5.2%	45.1
2021	1,095	4.6%	50.4
2022	1,165.1	3.4%	39.6
2023	1,318	3.6%	47.5
2024	1,317	3.6%	47.4
2025	1,328.6	3.8%	50.5

Source: Bank of England RTGS values & aggregated and anonymised data on UK card payments from Visa Europe Limited (2026)

Notes

1. The proportion of spending that visa cardholders spend online and abroad is used to proxy all UK cardholder spending online and abroad.
2. Data for 2025 international and online spend share are incomplete, only covering January to September.
3. Mastercard values are only available from 2021 onwards in the Bank of England data
4. Data in this table are statistics in development

Table 1 shows the BoE average daily net settlement values in each quarter aggregated up to obtain annual spending values, to which we apply the corresponding international online spending ratio, derived from the Visa data. This ratio excludes spending in the business to business" merchant category group, meaning that it better represents "household" card spending. We estimate that around £50.5 billion of card spend by households in 2025 took place online with international merchants or are "household digitally ordered imports".

It is important to note that merchant location at the time of transaction is assumed to equal residency, while online transactions are assumed to represent digital ordering under OECD terminology. For online transactions, the location can be determined by many factors, such as the merchant's principal place of business or where the transaction took place. This may cause distortions in assumed international trade flows and lead to measurement errors.

Ad hoc investigations

Card transactions data are imperfect for understanding the products and services being consumed over the internet. Therefore, we are carrying out case-by-case investigations into individual online services that have enabled households to interact directly with foreign companies in a way not possible before the rise of the internet.

Audiovisual streaming services

In September 2025, a new methodology was successfully implemented for measuring Extended Balance of Payments Services Classification (EBOP) service type, 11.1 Audiovisual and related services, to better capture audiovisual streaming.

Previously, the main source of data for this service type was the international trade in services survey (ITIS), so all data came from businesses. The newly developed method combines publicly available data on UK subscribers to large audio streaming platforms, as well as multiple other data sources on downloads and other digital consumption of audiovisual services, such as audio books.

From 2016 to 2023, revisions of between £0.7 billion to £2 billion were applied to imports of services in EBOP 11.1, for more detail about the impacts of these revisions, see Section 8: Sources of impact on imports of services of our Blue Book and Pink Book 2025: UK trade impact estimates article. As households are able to directly participate in international trade via digital platforms, developing this kind of method is vital to ensure our statistics are capturing the actual activity in this industry.

Short-term lets

A new method to measure the size of the short-term lets industry in the UK has been developed. In this industry, digital intermediation platforms (DIPs) facilitate transactions between hosts and guests in exchange for a fee, this fee is the monetary value of the "digital intermediation service" being provided by the DIP. More information on DIPs and how the services they provide are treated is available in our Developing UK digital trade statistics article.

When measuring the scale of international trade involving DIPs, it is necessary to understand the residency of the buyer, seller, and the DIP themselves. In the case of the short-term lets industry in the UK, the largest firms all have foreign residency, which means that they are not captured by UK surveys, and any fees paid to those platforms by UK hosts (sellers) or UK guests (buyers) would classify as an international transaction, or a digitally ordered and digitally delivered import.

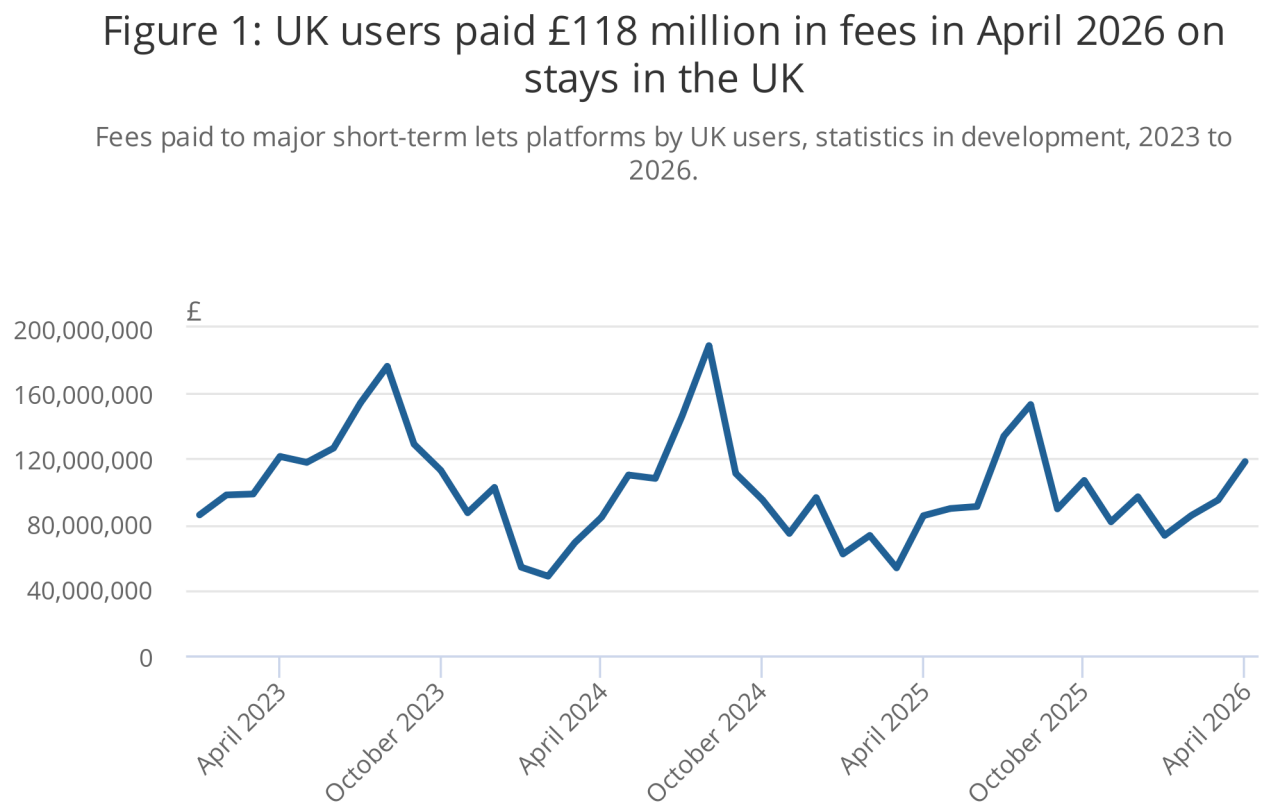
Similar to the audio-streaming method, various publicly available data sources regarding this industry are used in combination to develop an estimate of the total amount paid in fees to short-term lets platforms. The two main sources of data are VisitBritain's UK short-term rentals insights visualisation and our Short-term lets datasets.

From the VisitBritain dataset, we calculate an estimate for the total revenue earned by UK hosts from short-term lets, excluding fees. Then, using the number of guest nights from domestic and international guests derived from our dataset and a similar data series from VisitBritain, we calculate the percentage share of the revenue earned by UK hosts from each guest origin, so it is possible to exclude fees paid by non-UK guests staying in the UK.

From there, estimates of the market share of these major short-term lets platforms are derived using information published in their annual financial accounts. These firms have differing fee structures, with some charging fees to hosts only, and some charging fees to both hosts and guests: once the market share estimates and fee structures are applied to the UK host revenue, the fees paid by UK users and the total booking value can be estimated. It is important to note that this method only captures the booking value and fees paid to short-term lets based on bookings with UK hosts, and not for UK guests staying in properties abroad. However, this value should already be measured in travel services exports via the international passenger survey (IPS).

Figure 1: UK users paid £118 million in fees in April 2026 on stays in the UK

Fees paid to major short-term lets platforms by UK users, statistics in development, 2023 to 2026.



Source: Short-term rentals insights from VisitBritain and Short-term lets from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Values based on methods in development that is subject to change and approval.

This method highlights the potential scale of the fees being paid to these digital intermediation platforms and progress is being made to implement these estimates within national accounts in the future.

5 . Definitions

Digital trade

As defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD's) Handbook on measuring digital trade, second edition, digital trade is "all international trade that is digitally ordered and/or digitally delivered", where:

- digitally ordered trade (or international e-commerce) is "the international sale or purchase of a good or service, conducted over computer networks by methods specifically designed for the purpose of receiving or placing orders"
- digitally delivered trade is "all international trade transactions that are delivered remotely over computer networks"

Digital intermediation platforms

These are defined by the OECD Handbook on measuring digital trade as "online interfaces that facilitate, for a fee, the direct interaction between multiple buyers and multiple sellers, without the platform taking economic ownership of the goods or rendering the services that are being sold (intermediated)".

Modes of supply

This refers to the means of delivering services to foreign consumers. Remote trade or cross-border supply (Mode 1), takes place when the supplier remains in one territory while the service crosses national borders, the consumer being located in a different country.

See the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs's (UNSD's) Summary of the different modes of supply (PDF, 281KB) for the full definitions.

E-commerce

We follow the OECD's 2025 definition of e-commerce. This is the sale or purchase of goods or services, conducted over computer networks by methods specifically designed for the purpose of receiving or placing orders. The payment and ultimate delivery of the goods or services do not have to be conducted online.

6 . Data

Imports and exports of services by country, by modes of supply, UK
Dataset | Released 10 December 2025
Country breakdown of trade in services values by mode of supply (imports and exports). Countries include only total services data, while regions include top-level Extended Balance of Payments Services (EBOPS) breakdown.

Digital Economy Survey
Dataset | Released 20 April 2023
UK businesses' engagement in the digital economy including e-commerce sales and purchases, and use of other information and communication technology (ICT).

Guest nights, nights and stays for short-term lets, monthly, UK
Dataset | Released 28 November 2025
Number of guest nights, nights and stays in short-term lets offered via online collaborative economy platforms, by month.

7 . Related links

Developing UK digital trade statistics
Article | Released 5 May 2022
An introduction to digital trade and plans to develop estimates.

Consumer card spending, e-commerce and digital trade insights in the UK: 2019 to 2025
Article | Released 6 February 2026
Consumer card spending trends, covering where and how UK cardholders are spending, internationally and in the UK, with a focus on the role of the internet.

Digital Economy Survey: 2021
Bulletin | Released 20 April 2023
Use of information and communication technology (ICT) and the value of website sales by UK businesses.

UK trade quality and methods guide
Methodology | Updated 16 January 2026
What the UK trade statistics cover, how we produce them, and their quality and comparability. Includes definitions and latest, past and upcoming changes.

Handbook on Measuring Digital Trade, Second Edition | OECD
Report | Released 23 July 2023
Second edition handbook on measuring digital trade, defining the concepts, terms, and providing a statistical framework aimed at aiding statistical compilers in producing estimates of digital trade.

8 . Cite this page

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