

Being ahead of time: A practical guide to customs management for UK businesses trading with Europe

The end of the Brexit transition period in January 2021 marked a significant change in how UK-EU trade is carried out.

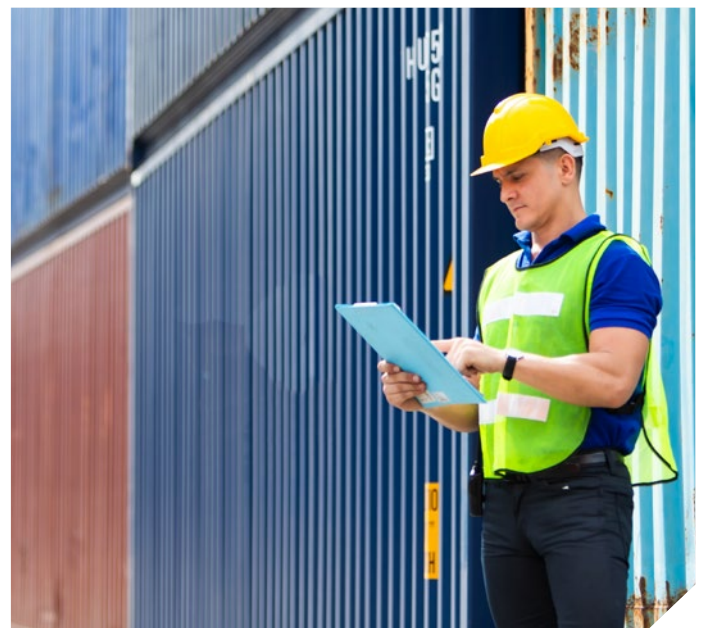
Goods that once crossed European borders freely now require customs declarations, compliance documentation and regulatory clearance at every crossing. Not all businesses were prepared for this, and the adjustment has been significant. Indeed, HMRC has estimated an additional £7.5bn annual burden on UK businesses from customs declarations alone, and UK goods exports to the EU remain 18% below their 2019 levels in real terms.

For many firms, that adjustment is still ongoing. The paperwork, product-specific requirements, shifting regulatory environment and practical realities of cross-border freight schedules add up to a demanding management challenge.

The businesses that handle customs well, however, are finding it can become a competitive advantage for them. When freight moves without delay, documentation is processed before the driver reaches the port, and regulatory changes are anticipated rather than reacted to, goods arrive on time and commercial relationships stay intact.

This paper sets out the UK-EU customs process, explores the challenges UK businesses face when trading with Europe, and explains how working with the right partner keeps freight moving.

The key to being successful? Being ahead of time.





Why it pays to get customs right

When customs management works well, the benefits are easy to overlook because nothing goes wrong. Drivers reach the port on schedule. Documentation is processed and transmitted electronically before the vehicle has left the yard. Goods clear the border and arrive when expected. The customer receives what they ordered.

That kind of seamless movement protects more than a single delivery. It protects the commercial relationships on both sides of it: the carrier who needs to keep to their schedule, and the end customer who has a slot to fill, a production line to feed, or a shelf to stock.

The costs of getting it wrong are often underestimated. A driver held at a port waiting for missing documentation can cost the customer €450-500 a day in standby charges, and that cost sits with the customer, not with customs.

A one-day port delay can cascade into three or four if a delivery slot in the destination country is missed, particularly when a weekend is involved. An Italian delivery slot missed on a Friday, for example, can mean a vehicle sitting idle until Monday, with daily driver costs continuing to accrue throughout.

Beyond the direct costs of delay, incorrect declarations carry their own risks. Research analysing more than 600,000 customs declarations found an average error rate of around 34%, and fines from HMRC audits have risen by 74% since 2020-21. Legal liability for those errors sits with the business, regardless of who submitted the declarations on their behalf.

Customs compliance, handled well, removes a layer of commercial risk, protects margins and gives customers confidence that their supply chain is in reliable hands.

A step-by-step guide to the customs process

Getting familiar with the main stages of customs management helps businesses know what to prepare and when – here is a brief guide to the major steps involved in moving goods between the UK and Europe.

EORI number and trading status

Before any goods move, your business needs a valid Economic Operators Registration and Identification (EORI) number. This is your identifier with customs authorities in both the UK and EU.

Commodity codes and product classification

Every product requires a commodity code under the UK Global Tariff. These determine what duty rates apply and any licensing or certification requirements – getting classification right from the outset avoids costly corrections later.

Duties, taxes and available reliefs

Customs duty and import VAT are calculated based on the commodity code, the declared value of the goods and their country of origin. Various reliefs may apply depending on the trade agreement in place and the nature of the goods.

Documentation

The commercial invoice is the most important document. Depending on the product and destination, you may also need a packing list, certificates of origin, veterinary certificates or other product-specific licences.

Customs declaration submission

Export and import declarations are submitted electronically through customs systems, either by your business directly or by an appointed customs intermediary or freight forwarder acting on your behalf.

Border clearance

Once declarations are submitted and accepted, goods can move to the port. Pre-lodgement of documentation avoids delays at the border and removes the need for secondary customs stops.

Post-clearance compliance and record-keeping

HMRC has a three-year retrospective window to audit declarations and recover underpaid duties. Maintaining accurate records and reviewing declarations on an ongoing basis is essential.

A note on product complexity. Straightforward manufactured goods with known weights and values can often be processed well in advance. Products containing animal by-products, variable-weight loads such as waste or aggregates, or goods requiring specialist licences introduce additional requirements and time pressure that need to be planned for carefully.



Being ahead of time: Managing the day-to-day

The commercial invoice is the document that drives most of the day-to-day customs process. For predictable loads with known product types, quantities and values, it can be prepared a day or two in advance, allowing declarations to be lodged and processed well before the vehicle is loaded. For more variable loads, such as waste or bagged aggregates where the precise weight is only known once the trailer has crossed a weighbridge, the window is considerably tighter.

European transport compounds that pressure further. Loads typically depart in the afternoon. European countries run one to two hours ahead. The gap between a weighbridge reading and a port departure can be short, and any delay in documentation reaching the customs team puts a driver's sailing at risk.

bwd's approach is to remove that risk wherever possible. Documentation is gathered, processed and transmitted electronically to the driver, who can access everything needed on their phone at the port on both sides of the crossing.

There is no requirement for physical paperwork and no need for secondary customs stops at locations such as Customs House in Dover. Many customs agents still operate this way, adding in hours to a journey as a result. bwd's process is designed so that the driver, wherever possible, loads and goes.

When issues do arise, bwd's team acts as the first point of contact with customs authorities. Random checks, inspection requests and documentation queries are handled directly, with the customer brought in only when their input is required. Duty or VAT payments due in European countries such as France or the Netherlands are facilitated same-day where needed to keep goods moving. When time is critical, the team picks up the phone.

Being ahead of time: Staying ready for what's coming

The day-to-day process is only part of effective customs management. The regulatory landscape governing UK-EU trade continues to evolve, and changes are not always well communicated ahead of their implementation.

The introduction of ICS2 illustrates this clearly. This EU entry summary declaration system extended requirements to cover all loads moving across European borders, rather than a select few. It was not widely publicised before it came into force. For businesses and logistics providers without early sight of it, the compliance gap was immediate.

bwd's response was to get ahead of it. The team identified the change early, contracted with a new system to handle the requirements, and sent detailed communications to all customers and carriers months before the deadline. For customers who needed new EORI numbers as part of the transition, bwd's team walked them through the application process step by step.

That kind of proactive management comes from the intelligence infrastructure bwd has built around regulatory change. As a member of the British International Freight Association (BIFA), the team receives regular updates on developments across the UK and European regulatory environment. A strong network of European clearance partners adds further visibility, particularly around country-specific requirements that fall outside standard UK customs procedures.

The practical benefit for customers is clear, in that they do not need to track regulatory change themselves. bwd monitors, interprets and communicates what customers need to do, with enough lead time to prepare properly.

Liz Dent | Fulfillment Coordinator | Arville Textiles

“We’ve been extremely pleased with the customs support provided by bwd. The team has consistently demonstrated a high level of expertise and professionalism, particularly when navigating complex and time-sensitive issues. Their proactive approach and clear communication have made a real difference in ensuring our shipments move smoothly, even when challenges arise. It’s reassuring to know we have a knowledgeable and reliable partner handling our customs processes.”





Conclusion

Customs management has become one of the more consequential parts of running a UK business that trades with Europe.

The admin requirements are significant, the compliance risks are serious, and the regulatory environment continues to change – businesses that treat it as an afterthought will see costs in the form of delays, errors and missed opportunities.

The businesses that manage it well share important things in common. They prepare thoroughly, build robust processes and work with partners who stay ahead of change on their behalf.

Being ahead of time is the difference between freight that flows and freight that stalls.

bwd provides the expertise, the infrastructure and the proactive approach to make that possible, whether as a standalone customs partner or as part of a broader transport solution.

To find out how bwd can support your customs management requirements, visit our website or contact the team directly.

bwd as your customs partner

One of the less well-known aspects of bwd's customs capability is that it is available as a standalone service. A business does not need to use bwd for transport in order to access its customs management expertise.

Indeed, the service can be configured around existing arrangements:

- Full end-to-end: transport and customs management combined
- Transport only
- Export customs only
- Import customs only
- Customs management as a standalone service, independent of who moves the freight

That flexibility makes bwd a practical option for businesses that have transport arrangements in place but want stronger customs support alongside them.

Whatever the configuration, customers have access to a dedicated customs team rather than a generalist operation. The team works extended hours to cover the realities of European freight schedules, often into the evening. When a situation needs a fast response, they pick up the phone.

For businesses new to European trade, or moving a new product type for the first time, bwd works through requirements from the ground up – what documentation is needed, what costs to expect, how the clearance process works and how to get everything in place before the first load moves. The aim is that, by the time freight is on the road, there are no surprises waiting at the border.





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