

COUNTRY MARKET INTELLIGENCE

United Kingdom Market Intelligence

Market structure, procurement and commercial entry

October 2026

Report navigation

- 1 Market structure and commercial context 2
- 2 Macro purchasing power and finance 2
- 3 China supply and procurement competition 3
- 4 Digital channels and payment 4
- 5 Industrial and sector demand mechanisms 4
- 6 Import tariffs, taxes and customs 5
- 7 Technical and consumer compliance 6
- 8 Logistics and commercial entry 7
- 9 References 9

Reading this report

The data retains its stated period, currency and measurement scope. ExpandOcean Views interpret the commercial implications of each analytical module. Sources are linked beside factual claims. Data cutoff: 16 October 2026.

1 Market structure and commercial context

The UK is an import-intensive economy with a broad business base and substantial services sector. The Department for Business and Trade reports UK imports of goods and services at £969.3 billion in 2025 in current prices, including £626.9 billion of goods and £342.4 billion of services. On the same series, imports in the 12 months to July 2026 were £1,005.7 billion, but this rolling year is not directly comparable as a calendar-year total.^[1] This scale supports many sourcing relationships, but competition for attention is intense.

China was the UK's third-largest import partner in 2025, supplying £73.4 billion of goods and services, or 7.6% of UK total imports; this was up 3.8% in current prices on 2024. The total includes £69.7 billion of goods and £3.8 billion of services. These are UK-reported balance-of-payments figures, not China's export mirror data, and they include goods and services rather than a goods-only customs denominator.^[2] A separate 12-month measure to March 2026 put UK imports from China at £74.9 billion, distinct from the calendar year.^[1]

The UK private sector comprised an estimated 5.69 million businesses at the start of 2025. More than 99% were small businesses with 0–49 employees, while 8,335 had 250 or more employees.^[3] For buyer discovery, this suggests two distinct sales motions: smaller importers may be directly reachable through founders or purchasing leads, while large retail, wholesale, manufacturing and facilities organizations often require vendor onboarding, category review and formal assurance. Qualify leads by decision-maker, importer status, purchasing calendar and evidence requirements.

ExpandOcean View

Map the buying system, not just the market

The £969.3 billion import figure represents the economy's total goods-and-services purchasing flow, not an addressable opportunity for a single supplier. China's £73.4 billion share is an economy-wide bilateral total dominated by goods and does not equate to a specific product category. Use these figures to frame the scale and existing familiarity of UK-China sourcing, then qualify accounts by buying authority, channel, category fit, compliance ownership and landed-cost economics. For smaller firms, shorten the route to a decision-maker; for enterprise accounts, build a documented path through procurement and technical approval.

2 Macro purchasing power and finance

UK household income and business finance conditions matter to reorder timing and price tolerance. In October–December 2025 real household disposable income per head rose 1.2% quarter on quarter, after falling 1.2% in the previous quarter; the household saving ratio rose 0.8 percentage points to 9.9%.^[4] For B2B, test account-level turnover, inventory turns, margin and category price position rather than inferring universal spending appetite.

At 17 September 2026 the Bank of England held Bank Rate at 3.75%, while the inflation rate was 3.1% against a 2% target.^[5] This favours proposals that clarify: quote currency and validity, deposits and balance dates, production and transit timing, and the implications of a larger minimum order.

Exchange rates, freight, duty, tax and finance also affect landed cost. Make price components and cost responsibility explicit. Where possible, validate specification, sample or pilot before volume commitment.

ExpandOcean View

Sell cost certainty as a procurement capability

Quarterly household indicators and Bank Rate do not describe every UK buyer's finances, but they clarify why price alone is incomplete. Translate a quote into a transparent landed-cost scenario with currency, shipping basis and duty/VAT treatment, showing how quantity and timing affect cash committed. Make cost drivers visible so buyers can compare fairly and keep conversations grounded in account-specific economics rather than broad market averages. Provide a shared basis for finance and operations to review before a purchase order is issued.

3 China supply and procurement competition

UK sourcing from China is established at national scale. China supplied 11.2% of UK goods imports in the 12 months ending March 2026, making it the second-largest goods import partner in that period; the share is not the same as China's share of all imports, which also includes services.^[2]

Competition comes from incumbents, importers, distributors, private-label programmes, sourcing teams and marketplaces. Account selection should distinguish retailers and brands from wholesalers, specialist distributors, contract manufacturers and end-users that purchase through intermediaries. Record category owner, procurement route, gatekeepers, replenishment model and overseas-supplier openness.

Buyers compare suppliers on specification, quality, documentation, responsiveness, order size, reliability and landed cost. Use verifiable product and process evidence, not generic low-cost claims. Sequence proof from buyer need and bounded specification to test/traceability evidence, sample approval, and explicit Incoterm, lead time and remedy terms.

ExpandOcean View

Treat incumbent supply as a conversion benchmark

China's second-place share of UK goods imports validates an established sourcing lane, not an empty competitive field. Buyers already compare suppliers on price, delivery, quality systems and service recovery, and their switching costs can be substantial. Discovery should therefore seek evidence of a buyer's unmet procurement constraint—such as supplier concentration, specification gaps or replenishment friction—before proposing a sourcing change. When no concrete switching case exists, maintain a low-cost nurture path instead of forcing a product-led pitch. Review account signals and requalify as purchasing conditions change. For example, new category ownership or a sourcing-calendar reset can reopen a conversation without repetitive cold outreach.

4 Digital channels and payment

Digital discovery is relevant across both B2B and consumer-facing routes, but channel selection should reflect the buyer type. ONS reported that online sales represented 28.8% of Great Britain retail sales in August 2026, up from 28.4% in July; online sales values were 8.9% higher than a year earlier.[6]

Combine search and professional networks with directories, events, distributor research and direct outreach. A procurement landing page should state company identity, scope, process, reviewable quality documents, contact route and next step.

UK payment behaviour is highly digital, though cards and cash remain relevant. In September 2024 consumers made 2.2 billion debit and credit card transactions; 77% of debit card and 65% of credit card transactions were contactless. The Payments Systems Regulator also cited 11.7 million active users of open-banking-enabled products and 22.1 million open-banking payments monthly.[7] Use secure business payment methods and verify beneficiary changes independently.

ExpandOcean View

Make digital proof easy to pass along

Retail's 28.8% online share indicates that digital product presentation is part of the UK commercial environment, while card and open-banking data describe payment infrastructure rather than procurement preference. Build materials for internal forwarding: consistent specifications, commercial terms and accessible compliance evidence. A buyer champion can circulate these to technical, finance and operations colleagues without rewriting or adding unsupported claims. Keep versions current and name a follow-up contact. This gives procurement a usable record and surfaces objections earlier. Maintain a clear version date so stakeholders do not rely on superseded specifications or compliance documents.

5 Industrial and sector demand mechanisms

UK demand is generated through several procurement mechanisms rather than a single retail route. Retailers and brands source for assortment and private label; wholesalers and distributors buy for resale and stock availability; manufacturers procure inputs and components against production plans; and public or regulated buyers may operate formal qualification and tender procedures. The UK has 5.69 million private-sector businesses, many small or non-employing.[3]

Retail buyers may require packaging, barcode, product-content, fulfilment, returns and replenishment information. Industrial buyers focus on specification fit, process reliability, documentation and continuity. A sourcing intermediary can align requirements and evidence, manage clarifications and smooth the move from sample to repeat order. That value should be demonstrated case by case, not claimed as a guaranteed saving.

UK ports handled 428.3 million tonnes in 2025; imports accounted for 237.5 million tonnes, and container tonnage increased 10% year on year.[8] These measure cargo mass, not merchandise value or category demand. For procurement planning, they reinforce the importance of port-to-warehouse handoff, container utilization, cargo insurance, customs documentation and contingency time. Explain which transport mode and shipment unit the quotation assumes.

ExpandOcean View

Qualify the mechanism behind demand

A buyer's sector label weakly predicts how it buys. The relevant mechanism may be a seasonal range review, recurring component replenishment, distributor stock policy or a tender with fixed documentation gates. Identify that trigger and its calendar before mobilising suppliers. Pair demand timing with buyer approvals to distinguish exploration from funded purchasing. Ask who authorises budget and what event triggers the order, then align supplier preparation with that calendar rather than an arbitrary outreach cadence.

6 Import tariffs, taxes and customs

The UK Global Tariff applies to imported goods unless an applicable UK trade agreement, relief, tariff suspension or developing-country scheme changes the treatment.[9] China-origin goods do not receive a general preferential tariff merely because they are sourced through China. Duty depends on classification, tariff, trade remedies and, where relevant, origin rules. The UK tariff lookup shows border tariff rates but excludes VAT and may not display the precise details of trade-remedy measures.[9]

Import VAT is separate from customs duty. The correct VAT treatment and taxable value depend on the goods, importer and transaction; businesses should confirm current HMRC guidance and the relevant VAT rate before pricing. Do not quote a universal duty or VAT percentage for an unspecified product. State exclusions for duty, VAT, clearance and delivery, and assign declaration and payment responsibility. These distinctions affect the buyer's landed cost and accounting treatment.

Businesses moving goods between Great Britain and other countries may need an Economic Operators Registration and Identification number (EORI); HMRC says an EORI is needed for relevant customs declarations and use of customs systems.^[10] EORI type depends on route, including Northern Ireland movements. A UK importer should establish who is importer of record, who files the declaration, what commodity code and customs value are used, and what evidence supports origin. Build those checks into quotation and purchase-order review rather than leaving them to arrival.

ExpandOcean View**Price the border before the purchase order**

A correct factory quote is not a complete UK procurement price. The UKGT's product-level classification, separate import VAT, possible trade remedies, customs representation and the buyer's importer-of-record position all influence landed cost and cash timing. Use the commodity code and shipment facts to structure a clear responsibility matrix, then direct the importer to validate the live tariff and tax treatment. This protects commercial comparability without assuming a country-level average tariff. Recheck the applicable code and conditions when specifications or origin change; duty assumptions should not persist by habit across unrelated consignments.

7 Technical and consumer compliance

Compliance depends on the product, intended use and market territory. Great Britain means England, Scotland and Wales; Northern Ireland has a distinct framework and must be assessed separately. The Department for Business and Trade's March 2026 guidance explains that UKCA and CE regimes cover more than 20 product types and that Great Britain continues to recognise CE marking alongside or instead of UKCA for product rules where the UK has chosen to recognise it. The product-specific legislation and current sector guidance determine the applicable route.^[11]

Not every product requires a conformity mark. Where a marking is required, the manufacturer must follow the relevant conformity assessment route, prepare technical documentation and declaration, and ensure the product meets all applicable rules. The UK guidance states that an importer placing a product on the market under its own name or trademark, or modifying it in a way affecting compliance, assumes manufacturer responsibilities.^[11] Set this role early, especially for private label; evidence for one variant does not automatically cover another.

Before outreach, map applicable rules, standards, testing, labels, traceability and responsible economic operators. Some regimes allow manufacturer self-declaration, while others require a conformity assessment body in defined circumstances.^[11] Confirm the evidence is current and specific to the exact model and configuration. For consumer goods, product safety and accurate online claims matter alongside marking. If requirements cannot be established from the category and destination, make the compliance review a precondition to commercial commitment rather than implying approval.

ExpandOcean View**Compliance is part of supplier qualification**

UK conformity is not a single mark that applies across every product, and importer responsibilities can shift when a buyer sells under its own brand. Treat compliance evidence as a buyer-discovery asset: determine which territory, product rules and brand structure apply before proposing a route to market. Match each claim and document to the exact model and legal role, while leaving formal conformity decisions to the responsible parties and competent assessors.

8 Logistics and commercial entry

UK sea ports handled 428.3 million tonnes in 2025, including 237.5 million tonnes of imports; container tonnage rose 10% from 2024.^[8] This is an established maritime gateway network, but freight availability and port throughput do not guarantee a particular route, transit time or price. Quote transport by shipment size, packaging, origin/destination, mode, validity and Incoterm. Include realistic allowances for production, booking, port handling, customs clearance and domestic delivery, with responsibility assigned at each handoff.

Begin with targeted account discovery; do not presume a local subsidiary is required. Routes include direct buyers, importers/distributors and platform or retail partners, each with different inventory, compliance and service responsibilities. Confirm expectations for samples, audits, insurance, warranty, liability evidence and onboarding. A trial order tests execution and buyer acceptance.

Track specifications, quotations, sample feedback, compliance, reorder signals, delivery and corrective actions. Review outcomes and document changes before reordering. Durable sourcing makes repeat procurement easier; one transaction does not establish long-term fit. Review delivery reliability, documentation accuracy and issue closure after each order. Use results to improve the next cycle while keeping specifications and responsibilities visible to buyer and supplier teams.

ExpandOcean View**Design entry around the second order**

UK port scale makes the logistics system legible, but repeat business depends on what happens after clearance: intact delivery, accurate documents, traceable specifications and responsive resolution of problems. Measure more than first-contact conversion. Track qualified-account progression, sample-to-order movement, on-time/in-full delivery, issue closure and repeat purchase by cohort. Those indicators show whether a relationship is becoming sustainable without presuming success. Review delivery reliability, documentation accuracy and issue closure with the buyer after each order. Use results to improve the next cycle while keeping specifications and agreed responsibilities visible to both teams.

9 References

Measurement note: Trade and macro values above are reported in their stated currencies, periods and scopes; 2025 calendar-year results are kept distinct from rolling 12-month and monthly indicators. UK buyer and product outcomes should be measured at account and shipment level.

For a procurement discussion, [contact ExpandOcean](#).

- [1] Trade and investment core statistics book
- [2] China Trade and Investment Factsheet 2026
- [3] Business population estimates for the UK and regions 2025: statistical release
- [4] Quarterly sector accounts, UK: October to December 2025
- [5] Interest rates and Bank Rate: our latest decision
- [6] Retail sales, Great Britain: August 2026
- [7] What's changed in the payments landscape?
- [8] Port freight annual statistics: 2025
- [9] Tariffs on goods imported into the UK
- [10] Get an EORI number
- [11] Placing UKCA or CE marked products on the market in Great Britain