

Written 20 December 2021

## **BUSINESS NEWS NORTHERN IRELAND**

Welcome to our round up of the latest business news for our clients. Please contact us if you want to talk about how these updates affect your business. We are here to support you!

This will be our last business newsletter before Christmas and the New Year break so let us wish you a happy Christmas and a prosperous New Year.

### **2021 – A year of resilience and recovery?**

Let us have hope that in 2022 we return to a more normal way of life free of the restrictions that we have faced over the last two years.

The pandemic happened and now is not the time to reflect how it happened or judge how it was managed, indeed further restrictions have recently been introduced and all we can do is take precautions individually to prevent the Omicron virus spreading and continue to take responsibility in the community to socially distance and help prevent the spread.

This year, despite the lockdowns and restrictions, we have been amazed at the resilience of clients and how they have energetically repurposed or pivoted their businesses into new areas, products and services. Businesses have redesigned delivery and payment systems, moved their entire processes digital, accepted remote working or new safe working environments and adopted to new technologies to survive and indeed prosper in the Covid-19 era.

Clients have demonstrated to us how we can all readily adapt to a change in circumstances and have given us inspiration and optimism for the future. We believe that by this time next year we will be back to where we want to be and more of our daily lives will resemble some kind of normality again. Do not give in to the virus, stay strong, be resilient and together we will move forward!



### **Job vacancies continue to rise!**

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimate that between August to October there was a continuing recovery in the labour market, with a quarterly increase in the employment rate,

while the unemployment rate decreased. Total hours worked increased on the quarter, due to the relaxing of some coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions but are still below pre-coronavirus levels. The UK employment rate was estimated at 75.5%, 1.1 percentage points lower than before the coronavirus pandemic (December 2019 to February 2020), but 0.2 percentage points higher than the previous quarter (May to July 2021).



The UK unemployment rate was estimated at 4.2%, 0.2 percentage points higher than before the pandemic, but 0.4 percentage points lower than the previous quarter. The economic inactivity rate was estimated at 21.2%, 1.0 percentage point higher than before the pandemic, and 0.1 percentage points higher than the previous quarter.

The number of people in part-time work jumped in the three months to October, after falling sharply during the pandemic and there was also a fall in unemployment among 16-24 year-olds, another group initially hit by the crisis.

Unemployment continues to fall after a spike last year, with job vacancies now at a fresh record high.

See: [Employment in the UK - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk)

### **HMRC Employer Bulletin December 2021**

The December edition of the [Employer Bulletin](#) brings you all the latest HMRC updates and guidance to support employers and payroll agents.

There is important information on:

- PAYE – there is important information for those who pay employees early for Christmas, and advice on how to prevent and correct payroll errors
- UK Transition and the recently agreed UK-Swiss Convention on Social Security coordination which came into force on 1 November 2021

- coronavirus (COVID-19) summary of guidance published by HMRC, and declaring grants on tax returns
- tax updates and changes to guidance, with information on the tax avoidance campaign

See: [Employer Bulletin: December 2021 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/bulletin-issues/2021-12)

### **UK average house prices increased by 10.2% over the year to October 2021**

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) latest figures show the UK's average house price increased by 10.2% over the year to October, down from 12.3% in the year to September 2021. The average UK house price was £268,000 in October 2021, which is £24,000 higher than this time last year.

The temporary changes to Stamp Duty, Land and Buildings Transaction Tax, and Land Transaction Tax may have allowed sellers to request higher prices as buyers' overall costs are reduced. As the tax breaks were originally due to conclude at the end of March 2021, it is likely that March's average house prices were slightly inflated as buyers rushed to ensure their house purchases were scheduled to complete ahead of this deadline.

This effect was then further exaggerated in June 2021, in line with the extension to the holiday on taxes paid on property purchases in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Following a decrease in July, average house prices increased in the months of August and September 2021, reaching a record level in September 2021 (when the last of the tax holidays came to an end in England). Despite a slight fall in the month of October 2021, average house prices remain higher than the previous peak seen in June.

Private rental prices paid by tenants in the UK rose by 1.7% in the 12 months to November 2021, up from 1.6% in the 12 months to October 2021. The beginning of 2021 saw a slowdown in rental price growth, which was driven by prices in London.

In England the October data shows, on average, house prices have fallen by 1.5% since September 2021. The annual price rise of 9.8% takes the average property value to £285,113.

See: [UK economy latest - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/gdp/growth)

### **Inflation at its highest rate in over a decade**

Consumer prices rose by 4.6% in the 12 months to November 2021, according to the lead measure of the Consumer Prices Index including owner occupiers' housing costs (CPIH). This is up from 3.8% in the year to October 2021. Annual inflation rates at this time are influenced by the effects of coronavirus (COVID-19) in 2020.

The Consumer Price Index (CPI) also rose from 4.2% to 5.1% in November 2021.

A wide range of prices contributed to the rise in inflation, with the largest upward contributions coming from motor fuels as well as clothing and footwear, where prices rose this year but fell a year ago.

See: [UK economy latest - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/gdp/gross-domestic-product-by-sector)

### **International travel update**

From 15 December 2021, all remaining countries were removed from the UK travel red list. The red list policy and additional testing measures in response to Omicron remain in place. As such, passengers arriving from Angola, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe will not have to stay in a managed quarantine hotel on arrival from this date. Pre-departure tests and PCR testing measures on or before day 2 remain in place, with a review of all travel measures in the new year. Airlines must continue to check all passengers for pre-departure tests alongside their completed Passenger Locator Form, and passengers will not be allowed to board a flight without providing evidence of a negative test result.

See: [https://www.gov.uk/government/news/11-countries-removed-from-the-uks-red-list?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm\\_source=8bb63897-ce51-4418-8ec9-b020ea65472d&utm\\_content=daily](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/11-countries-removed-from-the-uks-red-list?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_source=8bb63897-ce51-4418-8ec9-b020ea65472d&utm_content=daily)

### **Advice for pregnant employees**

The advice for pregnant employees on risk assessments in the workplace and occupational health during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has been updated to reflect recent government announcements. This advice is for you if you are pregnant and working as an employee. This includes pregnant healthcare professionals. It will help you discuss with your line manager and occupational health team how best to ensure health and safety in the workplace.

See: [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-pregnant-employees?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm\\_source=cba7a635-8615-497d-9d56-42b75160357c&utm\\_content=daily](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-pregnant-employees?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_source=cba7a635-8615-497d-9d56-42b75160357c&utm_content=daily)

### **Finding and choosing a private coronavirus (COVID-19) test provider**

The lists of and information about private test providers, to help you get the private COVID-19 tests you need, has again been updated.

See: [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/list-of-private-providers-of-coronavirus-testing?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm\\_source=a6136cb4-c6ae-4734-a4a1-abe3647dcdf1&utm\\_content=daily](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/list-of-private-providers-of-coronavirus-testing?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_source=a6136cb4-c6ae-4734-a4a1-abe3647dcdf1&utm_content=daily)

### **Second State Pension Age Review launches**

The Review will consider whether the rules around pensionable age are appropriate, based on the latest life expectancy data and other evidence.

The Pensions Act 2014 requires the government to regularly review State Pension age, and in accordance with law, this latest Review must be published by 7 May 2023.

State Pension age is currently 66 and two further increases are currently set out in legislation: a gradual rise to 67 for those born on or after April 1960; and a gradual rise to 68 between 2044 and 2046 for those born on or after April 1977. The first Review of State Pension age was undertaken in 2017 and concluded that the next Review should consider whether the increase to age 68 should be brought forward to 2037-39 before tabling any changes to legislation.

This Review will consider a wide range of evidence, for example, it will:

- examine the implications of the latest life expectancy data;
- provide a balanced assessment of the costs of an ageing population and future State Pension expenditure;
- consider labour market changes and people's ability and opportunities to work over State Pension age;
- and develop options for setting the legislative timetable for State Pension age that are transparent and fair.

See: [Second State Pension Age Review launches - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/second-state-pension-age-review-launches)

### **Covid certification scheme**

The Department for Health has introduced a Covid certification scheme in Northern Ireland, intended to reduce the number of infected people in high-risk settings.

The requirement for covid certification checks in selected business settings was introduced on 29 November 2021. Premises covered by the regulations were required to comply from that date.

The regulations became legally enforceable on Monday, 13 December, and a venue failing to comply with the law from that date can be fined up to £10,000.

See: [Coronavirus: Covid certification scheme \(nibusinessinfo.co.uk\)](https://nibusinessinfo.co.uk/news/covid-certification-scheme/)

### **Tender for Growth programme from Newry, Mourne and Down District Council**

The NMD Tender for Growth Programme aims to develop current supply chains by helping local businesses enter a new sector, move up a tier in a supply chain, open new opportunities in customer supply chains and establish tendering opportunities.

The programme is free to eligible businesses and will include:

- one-to-one expert mentoring support
- group-based mentoring

- meet the Buyer events

The programme will support a total of 170 eligible businesses over the period to 31 December 2022.

See: [Tender for Growth - NMD Business](#)

### **High Street Scheme: guidance for businesses – Scheme has now ended**

The deadline for using the Spend Local card was midnight Sunday, 19 December 2021. Any balance remaining on the cards after 19 December 2021 will no longer be able to be used by the cardholder.

See: [High Street Scheme: guidance for businesses \(nibusinessinfo.co.uk\)](#)

### **Launch of Apprenticeship Week 2022**

The Department for the Economy (DfE) has officially launched the second Northern Ireland Apprenticeship Week taking place from 7-11 February 2022.

The annual week-long celebration, led by DfE, aims to highlight the important role played by apprenticeships across Northern Ireland by bringing together partners including local councils, employers, universities, further education colleges and private training providers.

Through a series of in-person or virtual events, the week will showcase how apprenticeships can transform the future of apprentices and businesses.

See: [Apprenticeship week events | nidirect](#)

### **InterTradelreland Equity Advisory Clinics**

InterTradelreland's free Equity Advisory Clinics are aimed at helping companies seek equity investment and are delivered by venture professional, Drew O'Sullivan.

Companies will be advised independently on their fundraising activities including business plan review, investment pitch practice, and signposting to investors across the island of Ireland.

To be eligible for this service, you must have a minimum new equity funding requirement of €100,000. You will also need to provide one of the following, which will allow Drew to prepare in advance for the meeting:

- Business Plan (preferred submission)
- Executive summary/Investment Memorandum (InterTradelreland can provide you with a pro forma to complete in advance)
- Investment pitch slide deck

See: [Events | InterTradelreland](#)

## **The Industrial Energy Efficiency Accelerator**

The Industrial Energy Efficiency Accelerator (IEEA) will provide up to £8 million in grant funding to support industrial scale demonstrations of novel process technologies with the potential to reduce energy consumption, maximise resource efficiency and cut carbon emissions.

Successful applicants typically receive between 40 to 60 per cent of required funding for their project, with IEEA contributions expected to be between £150,000 and £1 million per project – the remainder to be provided by the applicant.

The four-year programme is designed to support partnerships between developers of energy and/or resource efficient technologies, and industrial companies willing to test technologies on-site. It is open to projects from all UK industry sectors that can demonstrate either a novel technology (targeting Technology Readiness Levels 5-8), or the use of an established technology in a novel way.

The IEEA is managed for the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) by the Carbon Trust and its partners Jacobs and KTN.

See: [Get involved in the Industrial Energy Efficiency Accelerator \(nibusinessinfo.co.uk\)](https://nibusinessinfo.co.uk)

## **Caravans Act consultation**

The Department for Communities (DfC) has launched a 12 week stakeholder engagement period as part of a review of the current Caravans Act.

Input is sought from interested stakeholders to help assess key emerging issues of the Caravans Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 in order to inform potential options to address.

An online questionnaire is available to gather the views of:

- caravan owners
- site owners
- qualifying residents' / occupiers' associations
- caravan organisations
- anyone else affected by the Act

Following analysis of the responses received, DfC will publish a report which will outline feedback received and the next steps.

See: [2021 Review: The Caravans Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011 - NI Direct - Citizen Space](#)