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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!

UK Government to crack down on ‘fire and rehire’ practices

The government is taking action against unscrupulous employers that use the controversial practice of ‘fire and rehire’, it has announced.



Last year P&O Ferries sought to evade the law by sacking 786 seafarers without due consultation. Having made no efforts to inform the Business Secretary at the time, they failed to follow best practice or do the right thing for their employees. As a result, the transport Secretary introduced a 9-point plan including primary legislation to tackle these issues.

Through a planned statutory code of practice, the government is protecting employees and cracking down on employers that use controversial dismissal tactics. The code, subject to a consultation first, will make it explicitly clear to employers that they must not use threats of dismissal to pressurise employees into accepting new terms, and that they should have honest and open-minded discussions with their employees and representatives.

‘Fire and rehire’ refers to when an employer fires an employee and offers them a new contract on new, often less-favourable terms. The government has been clear

on its opposition to this practice being used as a negotiating tactic and is now making it clear how it expects employers to behave.

This new statutory code of practice will set out employers' responsibilities when seeking to change contractual terms and conditions of employment, including that businesses must consult with employees in a fair and transparent way when proposing changes to their employment terms.

Once in force, Courts and Employment Tribunals will be able to take the code into account when considering relevant cases, including unfair dismissal. They will have the power to apply a 25% uplift to an employee's compensation in certain circumstances if an employer is found to not comply with the statutory code.

See: [Government cracks down on 'fire and rehire' practices - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-cracks-down-on-fire-and-rehire-practices)

Minimum wage rates increase from 1 April 2023

Employers should be aware that all minimum wage rates increase on 1 April of each year. This includes all National Minimum Wage rates and the National Living Wage rate.

See the table below that shows the current minimum wage rates and new rates from April 2023:

	Current rate (since April 2022)	New rate from April 2023	Increase
National Living Wage (23 years old and over)	£9.50	£10.42	9.7%
National Minimum Wage adult rate (21-22 years old)	£9.18	£10.18	10.9%
National Minimum Wage (18-20 years old)	£6.83	£7.49	9.7%
National Minimum Wage (16-17 years old)	£4.81	£5.28	9.8%
National Minimum Wage (apprentice rate)	£4.81	£5.28	9.8%
Accommodation Offset	£8.70	£9.10	4.6%

See: [National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage rates - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

HMRC is testing an automated SMS system

A new trial system aims to identify taxpayers seeking help with specific queries which HMRC considers can be resolved online. Such callers will be sent a text message containing relevant links.

Callers to HMRC's income tax helplines from a mobile phone will be dealt with in one of the following three ways:

- Callers with queries about their UTR or registering for online services will be sent an SMS that matches the key words they used to describe their query. The call will be automatically disconnected after a message explaining that an SMS has been sent.
- Callers with queries about whether they should register for self assessment or whether they should still complete a tax return, and those with requests for their income and employment history, will be offered the option of receiving an SMS or continuing to hold for an adviser.
- Callers who wish to know their National Insurance number or need help with filling in their tax return will be sent an SMS and given time to engage with it before deciding whether to terminate the call themselves or opt to continue to hold and be routed to an adviser.

The trial runs until the end of this financial year.

See: [New SMS service launched on HMRC helplines | The Association of Taxation Technicians \(att.org.uk\)](https://att.org.uk)

Selling online and paying taxes

If you regularly sell goods or services through an online marketplace, you could be classed as a 'trader'.

And if you earn more than £1,000 before deducting expenses through your trading, you will need to pay Income Tax on this.

For tax, an online marketplace is any website or mobile phone app that handles and enables the sale of goods and services from individuals and/or businesses to customers.

If you only sell items occasionally, you can [check if you need to tell HMRC](#) about this income.

If you've never declared income through a Self-Assessment tax return, you can [register for HMRC Online Services](#).

Please talk to us if you need any advice in this area.

See: [Selling online and paying taxes - information sheet - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/selling-online-and-paying-taxes)

British Tourism and Travel Show 2023

The British Tourism & Travel Show takes place from 22 March to 23 March 2023 at the NEC, Birmingham. It brings together hotels, attractions and destinations wanting to meet and do business with key decision makers responsible for planning holidays, trips and tours and breaks.

The show will attract 3,000 visitors and attendees include:

- coach operators,
- tour operators,
- group travel organisers,
- travel agents,
- travel services, and
- media and associations.

Who should exhibit?

Tourism suppliers wishing to work with the travel trade including:

- hotels,
- visitor attractions,
- destinations marketing companies,
- local specialists, and
- transport providers.

See: [British Tourism & Travel Show - British Travel & Tourism Show](https://www.britishtravelandtourismshow.co.uk/)

JCVI advice on the 2023 COVID-19 vaccination programme

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) has published a statement with its latest advice on the 2023 programme.

Whilst there is high level of strong population immunity developed over the past two and a half years, the risk of severe COVID-19 continues to be disproportionately greater in those from older age groups, residents in care homes for older adults, and persons with certain underlying health conditions. There also still remains on-going uncertainty regarding virus evolution, the durability and breadth of immunity, and the epidemiology of infection.

The JCVI has indicated that for a smaller group of persons (such as persons of older age and those who are immunosuppressed) an extra booster vaccine dose may be offered in spring 2023, whilst for autumn 2023, persons at higher risk of severe COVID-19 would be offered a booster vaccine dose. Emergency surge vaccine responses may also be required should a novel variant of concern emerge with clinically significant biological differences compared to the Omicron variant.

See: [JCVI statement on the COVID-19 vaccination programme for 2023: 8 November 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Data transfers listening workshops

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) is holding a series of workshops to listen to your feedback on the International Data Transfers Assessment, the Addendum and the Transfer Risk Assessment tool.

The ICO would like to hear about your practical experience in using these tools, perhaps as a data protection professional or small organisation. This will be an opportunity for them to understand how the tools are working in practice and to listen to your feedback.

These online workshops will take place on 14, 16 and 21 March 2023.

See: [Snap Surveys \(welcomesyourfeedback.net\)](#)

Fishing fund gears up to help industry go green

The UK fishing industry is to benefit from an initial £2 million investment to trial new, greener engines and help create a safer, more sustainable fishing fleet as the latest round of the £100m UK Seafood Fund opens.

Older vessel engines are some of the industry's biggest polluters and, according to a [report](#) by MARFISH, over half of the boats across the UK fishing fleet are now more than 30 years old, meaning that the annual energy use of the fleet is equivalent to that of 110,000 homes.

From today, vessels in the small-scale coastal fleet can bid for up to £40,000 to trial hybrid and electric engines, and up to £20,000 to fund replacement petrol and diesel engines that are more environmentally friendly.

As well as supporting the fishing industry to deal with rising fuel costs, the trial aims to gather new data and evidence to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions, improve efficiency and reliability, and help the fishing industry to reach net zero.

See: [Fishing fund gears up to help industry go green - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

UK sets out plans to regulate cryptoasset activities – Consultation announced

Plans to protect consumers and grow the economy by regulating cryptoasset activities have been announced by the UK government.

Cryptoassets – commonly known as ‘crypto’ – are a relatively new, diverse, and constantly evolving class of assets that have a range of potential benefits, as well as posing risks to the consumer.

As is common in emerging technology markets, the crypto sector continues to experience high levels of volatility and a number of recent failures have exposed the structural vulnerability of some business models in the sector.

Under plans set out by the government last week, it will seek to regulate a broad suite of cryptoasset activities, consistent with its approach to traditional finance.

These proposals will place responsibility on crypto trading venues for defining the detailed content requirements for admission and disclosure documents – ensuring crypto exchanges have fair and robust standards.

The proposals will also strengthen the rules around financial intermediaries and custodians – which have responsibility for facilitating transactions and safely storing customer assets.

In addition, to address industry concerns about the small number of Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) authorised cryptoasset firms who can issue their own promotions, HM Treasury is also introducing a time limited exemption. Cryptoasset businesses that are registered with the FCA for anti-money laundering purposes will be allowed to issue their own promotions, while the broader cryptoasset regulatory regime is being introduced.

This approach delivers on the original policy intention of the measure to promote innovation, enhance consumer protection and ensure that cryptoasset promotions can be held to equivalent standards as promotions of financial services products with similar risk profiles.

The government’s approach to regulation mitigates the most significant risks, while harnessing the advantages of crypto technologies. They state that this enables a new and exciting sector to safely flourish and grow, boosting jobs and investment.

See: [UK sets out plans to regulate crypto and protect consumers - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/uk-sets-out-plans-to-regulate-crypto-and-protect-consumers)

Business Charity Awards 2023

The Business Charity Awards provide the perfect platform to reflect on your efforts, share best practice and reward your achievements within the community.

The Awards recognise the outstanding contribution made by UK businesses to good causes. The awards not only recognise the role that individuals, teams and entire companies play in supporting charitable activity both at home and abroad, but also

help to educate the wider business community about the best ways to support good causes.

Charities may enter on behalf of their corporate partners and joint entries from companies and their corporate foundations will also be accepted for their work with charity partners.

The awards are open to companies of all sizes and across all industries.

The deadline for entries 23 February 2023.

See: [Home - Business Charity Awards](#)

Deposit Return Scheme for drinks containers

Consumers in Northern Ireland will be able to recycle their plastic and canned drink containers more easily through a new Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) set to be introduced by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) in 2025.

Every year NI consumers go through an estimated 420 million plastic drinks bottles and 90 million drinks cans, many of which are littered or condemned to landfill. Evidence has shown that a DRS can become a simple part of daily life to make recycling easier.

Through a small refundable deposit placed on single-use drinks containers, the DRS will incentivise people to recycle their drinks bottles and cans to redeem their deposits. Evidence suggests that an effective scheme could increase recycling rates to at least 90 per cent, reducing littering of these drinks containers by around 85 per cent, and reduce plastic pollution.

DAERA will work with its counterparts in England and Wales and with industry to press ahead with delivery of the scheme. The next phase will be to work through development of the legislation, taking necessary steps to ensure it will work in practice, and appointment of the deposit management organisation (DMO). The DMO will be an independent, industry-led organisation established to run the DRS.

See: [Deposit Return Scheme for drinks containers progresses | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs \(daera-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

Pay increase for agricultural workers from April 2023

Proposed increases to the minimum wage rates from 1 April 2023 for agricultural workers have been announced by the Agricultural Wages Board (AWB).

The AWB for Northern Ireland has proposed to increase existing minimum wage rates for agricultural workers for all grades by 8.5% from 1 April 2023.

New proposed minimum wage rates for agricultural workers:

Grade 1 - Minimum rate

Applicable for the first 40 weeks cumulative employment - £7.54 per hour

Grade 2 - Standard worker

£8.13 per hour

Grade 3 - Lead worker

£10.16 per hour

Grade 4 - Craft Grade

£10.92 per hour

Grade 5 - Supervisory Grade

£11.49 per hour

Grade 6 - Farm Management Grade

£12.48 per hour

Should the National Minimum Wage or the National Living Wage, as applicable, become higher than the hourly rates set out above then the hourly or other minimum rate will default to the National Minimum Wage or National Living Wage, whichever applies.

The AWB also proposes increasing the accommodation offset by 8.5% to £51.27 per week and the AWB proposes 3 days of bereavement leave following the death of a close family member.

See: [Pay increase for Agricultural Workers | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs \(daera-ni.gov.uk\)](https://daera-ni.gov.uk/pay-increase-for-agricultural-workers)

Belfast Met's design thinking webinars

Belfast Metropolitan College (Belfast Met) has a new Spring Design Series of fortnightly lunchtime webinars, running from 16 February to 27 April 2023.

The webinars will introduce you to design thinking and process and will offer you guidance and tools to help you develop ideas and concepts.

The Spring Design Series of webinars will take place on the following days:

- 16 February - [Workshop 1: Introduction to Design Thinking](#)
- 2 March - [Workshop 2: Empathy and User Research](#)
- 16 March - [Workshop 3: Ideation and Concept Development](#)
- 30 March - [Workshop 4: Prototyping and Testing](#)

- 13 April - [Workshop 5: Iteration and Refinement](#)
- 27 April - [Workshop 6: Putting it all Together](#)

This event series is open to all. You do not have to have your own brand or company to attend.

See: [Join Belfast Met's design thinking webinars \(nibusinessinfo.co.uk\)](http://nibusinessinfo.co.uk)

Digital skills survey seeks business views

The Department for the Economy (DfE) is carrying out a digital skills survey to evaluate and identify the skills gap within the tech talent sector. The survey gives businesses the opportunity to highlight any difficulties they have encountered attracting digital skills talent, what the barriers are, and explore the type of software skills businesses require to grow and prosper.

The results of the survey may be used to identify areas or trends in relation to skills within the digital sector that need to be addressed.

See: [Digital Survey Test - NI Direct - Citizen Space](#)

Apprenticeship employer event

Ulster University, in partnership with Invest Northern Ireland, is hosting this event as part of Northern Ireland Apprenticeship Week 2023. The event will showcase how local employers are using Degree Apprenticeships to recruit new talent and bridge higher-level skills gaps in the workplace within the services sectors.

You will find out how local employers have developed skills relevant to their business through Degree Apprenticeships and how apprenticeships help to drive productivity and boost business performance. You will also have the opportunity to find out about the range of apprenticeship programmes available.

Apprenticeship funding

The Degree Apprenticeship programmes are funded by the Department of the Economy and include specialisms such as:

- Accounting with Management
- Business Technology
- Financial Technology
- Leading Customer Operations
- Business in Technology
- FinTech Management

Who should attend?

Business owners, leaders, managers, and people professionals who have an interest in exploring cost-effective ways to attract, retain and develop skills and talent relevant to their business. This event is aimed at both large and small businesses, particularly those operating in the professional, technology, and financial services sectors.

Date: Wednesday 8 February 2023, 6pm to 7:30pm, Ulster University, York Street, Belfast

See: [nibusinessinfo.co.uk Events Finder - Apprenticeship Employer Event: Unlocking Tomorrow's Talent, Events](https://nibusinessinfo.co.uk/Events-Finder-Apprenticeship-Employer-Event-Unlocking-Tomorrow's-Talent-Events)

Newry, Mourne and Down Job Fair

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council is hosting a job fair, supported by the Department for Communities, on Thursday 9 March, from 10am to 2pm in Downpatrick.

Whether you are looking to change job or progress in your chosen profession, Newry, Mourne and Down Labour Market Partnership will host a range of opportunities on offer by local employers. With competitive salaries, excellent benefits, opportunities for promotion and an extensive learning and development programme, you will find the best path suited for you.

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council is inviting employers with actual or upcoming job vacancies to apply for a stand at the fair. The job fair will have information stands about training available to help people secure jobs as well as to support businesses with their recruitment, employment, and training needs.

See: [Spring Forward and Secure your New Job at Newry, Mourne and Down J \(newrymournedown.org\)](https://newrymournedown.org)

Derry and Strabane Enterprise Week 2023

Derry City and Strabane District Council is hosting a week-long programme of events supporting budding entrepreneurs and seasoned business owners in the area.

Enterprise week will take place from Monday 6 March to Friday 10 March 2023 and the theme 'Seeds of Change' will explore the business lifecycle from ideation through to realisation. It will offer expert advice, host practical sessions from industry leaders and celebrate the Northwest's business landscape.

See: [Derry City & Strabane - Programme \(derrystrabane.com\)](https://derrystrabane.com)