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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!

Minister urges businesses to take cyber security seriously

The Security Minister, Dan Jarvis, has urged business leaders to act now to strengthen their cyber resilience, warning that cybercrime is one of the biggest threats facing the UK economy.

Speaking at the launch of the National Cyber Security Centre's (NCSC) 2025 Annual Review, he reminded businesses that cyber security is no longer just a technical issue - it's a board-level one.

A growing threat

The numbers tell the story. The NCSC handled more than 200 serious cyber incidents in the past year - more than double the previous year. These are the types of incidents that can disrupt essential services, cause financial damage, or even threaten national security.

Big names like Marks & Spencer, The Co-op and Jaguar Land Rover have all faced attacks this year. But Jarvis was clear that businesses of all sizes can be affected by cyber-attacks.

Tools to help businesses

The good news is that practical help is available. NCSC is expanding its support for businesses of all sizes.

- [Cyber Action Toolkit](#): Designed to help sole traders and small firms take their first steps in protecting their systems and data.
- [Cyber Essentials](#) certification: A recognised badge showing that a business is protected against common threats. For small organisations (under £20m turnover), full certification also includes automatic cyber liability insurance.
- [Early Warning service](#): Over 13,000 organisations now receive alerts about potential cyber-attacks, giving them valuable time to act.
- [Takedown Service](#): Has removed over 1.2 million phishing campaigns, with half taken down within an hour.

Why this matters for business owners

For many businesses, cybersecurity is often treated as a low-priority issue until something goes wrong. Jarvis encouraged that this approach change. He said, “It’s not a case of if you will be the victim of a cyber-attack, it’s about being prepared for when it does happen.”

Beyond any immediate financial cost, reputational damage can last far longer. Customers, suppliers and investors increasingly want to know that the businesses they work with are taking security seriously.

It’s not just an IT issue

Jarvis’s speech revealed that government ministers and security chiefs have written a letter to the CEOs of all companies in the FTSE 100 and FTSE 250, as well as a number of other leading UK firms.

The letter requests that these businesses make cyber risk a Board-level priority and sign up to NCSC’s Early Warning service.

Interestingly, the letter also requests that these companies require Cyber Essentials in their supply chain. This is because supply chain cyber-attacks are increasing, but it appears that only 14% of UK businesses assess the cyber risks posed by their immediate suppliers.

What to do next

If your business hasn’t reviewed its cyber protections recently, now’s the time.

1. Start with the basics: Visit the NCSC website and make use of the [Cyber Action Toolkit](#).
2. Consider [Cyber Essentials](#) certification: In view of the direction being encouraged, you may find that your customers start to expect that you hold this certification. You could also consider whether requiring it of your suppliers would benefit you.

The message for business owners from the Minister’s speech is simple: act now, not later. Cyber security isn’t just an IT issue - it’s part of protecting your livelihood, your team and your reputation.

See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/minister-calls-on-business-leaders-to-act-now-against-cyber-risks>

New Cyber Toolkit Helps Small Businesses Strengthen Their Defences

Small businesses across the UK are being urged to take simple, practical steps to protect themselves from growing online threats - and a new free toolkit from the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) aims to make that much easier.

The Cyber Action Toolkit, launched this week at the NCSC's Annual Review, offers tailored guidance to help sole traders, micro businesses and small organisations strengthen their cyber security.

NCSC's latest annual review warns that every organisation with digital assets is a potential target for criminal cyber attackers. NCSC's CEO, Dr Richard Horne, urged all businesses to 'act now.'

A growing problem

Recent figures show that 42% of small businesses reported a cyber breach in 2024, while more than a third of micro businesses faced phishing attempts. Many small firms admit they simply don't know where to start - often because cyber protection feels complicated or time-consuming.

The NCSC's new toolkit aims to help with that. It breaks cybersecurity down into simple, achievable steps for businesses, with straightforward actions tailored to their size and needs.

What the new toolkit offers

The Cyber Action Toolkit is free to use and provides:

- Personalised cyber security guidance.
- Step-by-step actions tailored to business size.
- Progress tracking and rewards to recognise each improvement you make.

It's structured around three levels - Foundation, Improver and Enhanced - so businesses can progress through the levels at their own pace and build their resilience gradually.

As you put in place the basic measures recommended by the toolkit, this can be a good starting point in later working towards Cyber Essentials certification.

Taking the first step

For busy business owners, cybersecurity can easily fall down the to-do list. But the reality is that small steps now can save a lot of time and stress later, and the Toolkit seems to be a useful tool in helping with that.

You can access the Cyber Action Toolkit free through the NCSC website.

See: <https://cybertoolkit.service.ncsc.gov.uk>

Why getting minimum wage calculations right matters more than ever

Matthew Taylor CBE, author of the influential Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices, has been appointed as the first Chair of the new Fair Work Agency – a body that's set to change how the UK enforces employment rights.

The Agency, which launches in April 2026, will become a single point of contact for workers and employers.

Government figures suggest that 900,000 UK workers have holiday pay withheld each year and nearly 20% of minimum wage workers are underpaid.

The Fair Work Agency will be given stronger powers to investigate and tackle employers. These include workplace inspections, civil penalties for underpayments, and the ability to bring proceedings against an employer on behalf of a worker.

At the same time the Agency is being tasked with providing support to businesses on following employment laws so that employers who want to do the right thing aren't being undercut by those who don't.

With the Agency not being launched until next April, now is the time to review how your business calculates pay.

If you're unsure whether your pay systems are up to date or need help understanding how upcoming changes in employment law might affect your payroll, we would be happy to help you! A quick review now could save a costly investigation later.

See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-agency-chair-appointed-to-crack-down-on-minimum-wage-underpayment-and-worker-exploitation>

What the CMA's new powers over Google mean for UK businesses

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has confirmed that Google has been designated with strategic market status (SMS) for its general search and search advertising services - marking a major moment in how the UK regulates big tech.

This follows a detailed investigation and consultation that confirmed that Google has substantial and entrenched market power in general search and search advertising. It appears that more than 90% of searches in the UK take place on Google's platform.

The new designation doesn't accuse Google of any wrongdoing, nor does it introduce immediate changes. But it gives the CMA the power to step in with targeted, proportionate interventions to ensure that general search services are open to effective competition. It also means they can make sure that businesses that rely on Google can be confident they are being treated fairly.

The move is part of the UK's new digital markets competition regime, which came into force at the start of 2025.

For small and medium-sized businesses, the potential benefits are significant. Over time, we may see fairer advertising pricing, more transparency in how search results and ad placements are managed, and fewer barriers for newer platforms and services trying to compete.

Nothing changes immediately, but consultations on possible interventions are expected later this year. It's a space worth watching - especially for businesses that depend heavily on Google Ads or organic search visibility.

See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/cma-confirms-google-has-strategic-market-status-in-search-services>

How to Save on Childcare Costs with the Tax-Free Childcare Scheme

Running your own business often means juggling a lot - and for many, that includes childcare. With autumn school breaks rapidly approaching, HMRC is reminding working families that the Tax-Free Childcare scheme can be a good way to make some savings.

What's on offer

Through the scheme, you can get up to £2,000 a year toward childcare costs for each child up to the age of 11, or up to £4,000 (up to the age of 16) if your child is disabled. The government adds £2 for every £8 you pay into your childcare account - and you can use that money to pay for approved childcare, such as nurseries, wraparound childcare, after-school clubs, or holiday clubs.

Your childcare provider needs to be signed up to the scheme before you can pay them, so you do need to check with them to see that they're signed up.

It's completely flexible: you can pay in whenever you like, use it straight away, or leave it in the account until needed. If your plans change, any unused money can be withdrawn.

Who can use it

You don't need to be on a payroll to qualify - self-employed parents can use the scheme too. Your family may be eligible if:

- Your child is 11 or under (or 16 if they have a disability).
- You and your partner (if you have one) earn, or expect to earn, at least the National Minimum Wage or Living Wage for 16 hours a week on average.
- You each earn less than £100,000 per year.
- You're not claiming Universal Credit or childcare vouchers.

How to get started

You can apply online by visiting [the Tax-Free Childcare section of GOV.UK](#). Each child needs their own account, and the government top-up is added to each one separately.

Once your account is open, you'll need to reconfirm your details every three months to keep the top-up payments coming.

With school holidays around the corner, now's a good time to check if you're eligible and set up your account - especially if you're self-employed or running a small business and need reliable childcare to keep work flowing smoothly.

See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/570000-families-avoid-the-halloween-chills-by-using-tax-free-childcare>

New funding announced to help UK communities showcase local traditions

A new £1 million "Best of British" fund has been launched by Airbnb, supported by VisitBritain, to help communities and small tourism businesses turn local customs and traditions into memorable visitor experiences.

The fund, which will offer grants of up to £100,000, aims to help local businesses develop experiences that celebrate Britain's culture, heritage and creativity - from centuries-old customs like maypole dancing and cheese rolling, to regional food, music and arts events.

The initiative follows research showing that, while many holidaymakers are keen to find authentic local experiences, half of UK adults have never taken part in a traditional British event. There's also a clear appetite for change - 61% of people said they would be more likely to book a UK break "off the beaten track" if these traditions were better promoted.

VisitBritain's Chief Executive, Patricia Yates, said, "We encourage all eligible tourism businesses and organisations to apply to the fund.

The scheme will award funding in four categories: Nature & Outdoors, Food & Dining, Music & Arts, and Culture & Heritage. Applications are open until 23 November 2025, with funding to be distributed next year.

For small tourism operators, community groups or heritage sites, this could be an opportunity to secure investment, attract more visitors, and strengthen local identity - all while contributing to the growth of sustainable, experience-led tourism across the UK.

For details and to apply, see: <https://www.airbnb.co.uk/e/bestofbritishfund>

CMA Publishes Review and Proposals for the Vet Industry

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has published proposals to overhaul how the veterinary market works. While this review focuses on vet businesses, its findings provide some useful insights for businesses of all types - particularly around transparency, communication, and customer confidence.

What's happening

The CMA's investigation found that many pet owners struggle to understand what they're paying for when they visit the vet. Prices are often unclear, comparisons are difficult, and complaints can be hard to make when things go wrong.

The market has also changed dramatically in recent years. Independent practices have been bought by larger corporate groups, and yet many clients don't realise who actually owns their local surgery. Between 2016 and 2023, average vet prices rose by more than 60% - well above inflation - and in some cases, prices increased faster after businesses were taken over by bigger groups.

The CMA concluded that the current regulatory system doesn't keep up with how the sector now operates. It regulates individual professionals, but not the businesses behind them.

The proposed changes

To address these issues, the CMA has suggested a wide-ranging package of 21 measures. The proposals include:

- Requiring vet businesses to make ownership clearer and to be more open about their services and fees. A price cap of £16 on prescriptions is also proposed.
- Requiring vets to explain where clients might find cheaper medicines and to provide prescriptions automatically, with a cap on what practices can charge for issuing them.
- Providing clear price information when pet owners are choosing a treatment, putting estimates of prices for treatments over £500 in writing and providing itemised bills.
- Making it easier for customers to compare local options through an improved "Find a Vet" website that will include price information.
- Modernising the regulatory framework to cover veterinary businesses, not just individual vets, to ensure proper standards and fair handling of complaints.

The [CMA's consultation](#) runs until 12 November 2025, with their final decision expected by March 2026. They are encouraging vet businesses to carry on and make changes that would benefit their customers in the meantime.

What it means for other business owners

Even if you're not in the pet care world, there are some good lessons here.

The CMA's proposals underline how crucial transparency and clear communication have become in building client trust.

Customers increasingly expect to understand how a service is structured, who owns the business, and what they can expect to pay.

The CMA's final decision is due in early 2026, but the message for business owners is already clear: transparency builds trust, and trust sustains long-term client relationships.

See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/major-reforms-would-require-vet-businesses-to-make-fundamental-changes-to-the-way-they-support-pet-owners>

Northern Ireland businesses invited to help shape age-inclusive workplaces

Local employers are being encouraged to take part in new research that aims to make workplaces across Northern Ireland more age-inclusive.

The Age-Positive Workplaces Project, which is being delivered in partnership with EPIC Futures NI and Ulster University, will explore how organisations can challenge outdated recruitment and retention practices, with a particular focus on supporting employees aged 50 and over.

Participating businesses will receive evidence-based training and attend interactive workshops. They will be helped to better understand how they currently do things and be shown areas of improvement and practical strategies that will help in attracting, developing and retaining talent at every stage of life.

As well as the direct organisational benefits, involvement offers the chance to shape research that could influence future employment policies across Northern Ireland and beyond.

The project team is currently seeking representatives from up to 20 member organisations across Northern Ireland. Only one representative per organisation will be selected to ensure a diverse mix of employers and sectors.

For more details or to express interest, see:

<https://www.bitcni.org.uk/programmes/age-positive-workplaces/>