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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 Unemployment Rises to 5% as Job Market Shows Signs of Strain

The UK unemployment rate has risen to 5% in the three months to September, the highest since early 2021, according to the latest figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The increase was slightly higher than expected and adds to signs that the jobs market is starting to soften.

The rise comes ahead of the government's Budget later this month and may add further pressure to the Chancellor's decisions.

Signs of a cooling jobs market

While unemployment has ticked up, the number of job vacancies has remained broadly unchanged at around 723,000 between August and October. Early data suggests the number of people on company payrolls fell by 180,000 in the year to October - more than forecasters had predicted.

Liz McKeown, director of economic statistics at the ONS, said the latest data "points to a weakening labour market", with unemployment reaching a post-pandemic high. The ONS noted that its unemployment figures should be treated with caution while it continues work to improve data quality.

Wage growth slows

Average pay growth across the economy stood at 4.6% in the third quarter, slightly down from 4.7% in the previous three months. The difference between public and private sector pay continues to widen: public sector wages rose 6.6%, while private sector grew 4.2%.

According to Yael Selfin, chief economist at KPMG UK, public sector pay growth is "approaching a peak" as last year's pay settlements work their way through the system. She added that private sector pay is likely to slow further as more people re-enter the workforce, reducing wage pressures.

What this means for employers

For many businesses, the figures reinforce what's already being felt on the ground. Richard Carter of Quilter Cheviot suggested that with the Budget only weeks away, many companies have "shelved any major hiring plans" amid uncertainty over potential new costs or tax changes.

The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) echoed that view, warning that regulation, litigation and tax burdens continue to make it harder for smaller businesses to employ staff.

Looking ahead

The Bank of England has projected that unemployment will remain close to 5% for the next few years, suggesting employment growth could remain subdued over the medium term.

For business owners, the key questions now centre on the upcoming Budget - whether measures will support job creation and investment, or whether further cost pressures could make a challenging jobs market even tougher.

See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cdxrp7znkdlo>

Have You Received a Letter from HMRC About Making Tax Digital?

HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) are writing to some taxpayers to tell them what they need to do to get ready for the new Making Tax Digital rules that come into force next April.

What is Making Tax Digital?

Making Tax Digital for Income Tax is a new way for sole traders and landlords to provide their business accounts and tax information to HMRC.

It involves using software to maintain digital accounting records and then submit reports to HMRC each quarter.

From 6 April 2026, Making Tax Digital will be mandatory for almost all sole traders and landlords who had gross income over £50,000 in the 2024/25 tax year.

Why have you received a letter?

If your 2024/25 tax return has already been filed and your total gross income from self-employment and/or rental income is more than £50,000, then HMRC are likely to have written to you.

It is worth noting that even if HMRC have not sent you a letter but your income from self-employment and/or rental income for the 2024/25 tax year is more than £50,000, you will still be required to follow the new Making Tax Digital rules from next April.

What to do next

A small minority of taxpayers may be exempt from the new rules, so you may want to check this first. For instance, if it is not reasonable for you to use software to keep digital records or submit them to HMRC, it is possible to apply for exemption. HMRC would then confirm whether they accept your application.

Otherwise, you will need to:

1. Choose compatible software to keep the digital records needed for the new system. If you already use software to manage your accounting information, check with your provider that the software is ready for Making Tax Digital.
2. Sign up on GOV.UK for Making Tax Digital for Income Tax.

If you need any help with signing up, choosing software or submitting reports to HMRC, please get in touch. We can offer you anything from tailored advice to a full Making Tax Digital service designed to give you peace of mind.

NCSC Launches Free Cyber Action Toolkit to Help Businesses Boost Security

As previously reported, the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) has launched a new free Cyber Action Toolkit to help small businesses strengthen their cyber defences in a simple and affordable way.

The toolkit has been designed for businesses that may not have in-house IT expertise or large security budgets, offering clear, practical steps that can be implemented straight away.

Helping small businesses take action

NCSC recognises that many small businesses find cybersecurity daunting, perhaps feeling that it is too technical, too costly, or simply not a priority. The sheer volume of guidance available can also be off-putting. This all leads to feeling overwhelmed and leaving cybersecurity for another day.

The new Cyber Action Toolkit aims to change that by providing easy-to-follow actions that provide immediate protection, even for those new to cybersecurity. The format focuses on taking a series of simple steps rather than just reading through guidance.

According to NCSC, the Toolkit has been tested by more than 2,500 trial users with good results.

As one early user, copywriter Siobhan Strode, commented: "Having a guide was really helpful. I felt really motivated to tick actions off - they were quick to do."

Why it matters for your business

Although many see cybersecurity as something that is more relevant to larger businesses, the NCSC advise that no business is too small to be a target. Small businesses are just as likely to experience online crime as larger ones.

To access the Cyber Action Toolkit, see: <https://cybertoolkit.service.ncsc.gov.uk>

IPO Announces 25% Fee Increase from April 2026

The Intellectual Property Office (IPO) has confirmed plans to raise its fees by an average of 25% from 1 April 2026, subject to parliamentary approval. The change will affect applications and renewals for patents, trademarks, and designs.

This marks the first major fee increase in several years, with some fees unchanged for more than two decades. The IPO says the rise is necessary to keep pace with inflation and maintain the quality of its services.

The change means most fees will go up by around a quarter. For example:

- A patent search will rise from £150 to £200.
- A trademark application will increase from £170 to £205.

Full guidance will be published early in 2026 to help those whose payments fall close to the transition date.

The IPO has also updated its 'how to pay' information online, including revised terms and conditions for deposit account holders.

If approved, the new fee structure will take effect from 1 April 2026. Until then, the current fees remain in place.

See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/intellectual-property-office-fees-to-increase-from-april-2026>

New Rules Allow Professional Drivers with Diabetes to Use Glucose Monitoring Technology

From 7 November 2025, professional bus, coach, and lorry drivers with diabetes are now allowed to use modern glucose monitoring technology such as Continuous Glucose Monitoring Systems (CGMS). These systems use sensors to track glucose levels in real time.

Until now, Group 2 drivers - those holding licences for buses and lorries - had to rely on finger-prick tests to check their blood sugar before and during driving. The updated rules now allow them to use CGMS, bringing them in line with Group 1 drivers (car and motorcycle), who have been able to use this technology since 2018.

From 7 November, bus, coach and lorry drivers:

- Can now use CGMS for real-time glucose monitoring.
- Must still pull over safely if they need to confirm a reading.

Tim Moss, Chief Executive of the DVLA, said the change is about making life easier for drivers with diabetes while keeping roads safe. He said that embracing modern technology will help thousands of professional drivers manage their condition more effectively and with greater confidence.

If you are a professional driver or employ drivers, this change should provide more flexibility and increase safety through real-time monitoring.

See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/dvla-modernises-diabetes-rules-for-bus-and-lorry-drivers>

ICO Consults on New Guidance for Investigations and Enforcement

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) has opened a consultation on new guidance that sets out how it investigates potential data protection breaches and takes enforcement action.

Increasing transparency

The proposed guidance explains the processes the ICO follows when it suspects an organisation may have failed to comply with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018.

Key points in the draft guidance

The draft guidance sets out:

- How the ICO decides whether to open an investigation or resolve concerns in another way.
- What can be expected during an investigation.
- How the ICO will use its information-gathering powers, including new powers under the Data (Use and Access) Act 2025 to require individuals to answer questions and organisations to provide reports.
- How decisions on the outcome of an investigation are made, including when warnings, reprimands, enforcement notices, or penalty notices may be used.
- When the ICO may consider a settlement with a reduced fine, and how that process works.

Updates to align with recent legislation

Once finalised, the new guidance will sit alongside the ICO's Data Protection Fining Guidance, with the two forms of guidance replacing the current Regulatory Action Policy.

The Data (Use and Access) Act 2025 also extends the ICO's investigatory and enforcement powers under the Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations 2003 (PECR), bringing them broadly into line with the powers the ICO has under data protection law. While some differences remain, the ICO intends to apply a similar approach to both areas.

What this means for you

Where you act as a data controller or processor, awareness of this new guidance could be helpful in preparing for potential investigations and demonstrating good management of your data protection compliance responsibilities.

The consultation closes on Friday 23 January 2026.

To review the draft guidance and respond to the consultation, see:

<https://ico.org.uk/about-the-ico/ico-and-stakeholder-consultations/2025/10/ico-consultation-on-data-protection-enforcement-procedural-guidance/>

Go Succeed Business Support Events Across Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland's Go Succeed programme runs a series of free workshops and events that are designed to help local businesses.

Led by Northern Ireland's eleven local councils, Go Succeed provides practical advice, training and networking opportunities for entrepreneurs at every stage - whether you are exploring self-employment or are running an established business and are ready to expand into new markets.

The current schedule offers a wide range of sessions, both online and in person, covering marketing, finance, digital tools, and business development. Here are a few highlights.

How to Get a Patent and Why

This masterclass is designed to demystify intellectual property and guide you through the essentials of safeguarding innovation.

- Date: Monday, 24 November 2025
- Time: 4pm - 5:30pm
- Venue: online

Accessing Finance for Start-Ups

This masterclass will help start-up business owners understand how to access finance and the funding landscape supporting start-up businesses in Northern Ireland.

- Date: 27 November 2025
- Time: 6pm - 8pm
- Venue: Antrim Enterprise Agency, Antrim

Side Hustles & Self-Employment: How to Get Started in Business

This online workshop will help you with the essential practical tools and techniques to develop your idea into a reality.

- Date: Monday, 1 December 2025
- Time: 10am to midday

- Venue: Omagh Library, Omagh

Time to Work for Yourself? Is Business Right for You?

This drop-in session will help you learn what's involved in starting your self-employment journey.

- Date: 3 December 2025
- Time: 10am to midday
- Venue: Warrenpoint Town Hall, Newry

For a list of all upcoming events, see: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/go-succeed-business-events>

Pay Transparency: Balancing Fairness and Business Realities

The Labour Relations Agency (LRA) recently hosted an international conference exploring the question: when it comes to having a good job, is there anything more important than pay?

The 'Let's Talk About Pay' conference brought together employment relations experts from across the world - including New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, the UK and Ireland - to discuss the importance of pay to Northern Ireland's economy.

Opening the event, Economy Minister Dr Caoimhe Archibald cut to the chase by saying, "We use all sorts of indicators to assess economic performance, but what ultimately matters to people is the pay they take home."

LRA Chief Executive Mark McAllister described pay as "the policy elephant in the room", noting that conversations about fair wages often become caught between the competing pressures of the cost of living and the cost of doing business.

The case for transparency

Greater pay transparency can bring benefits for both employers and employees. For instance, clearer information on pay scales helps to reduce inequalities, improve trust and attract skilled workers in a competitive labour market. When staff understand how pay is determined, it can also enhance motivation and perceptions of fairness.

The challenges

However, full transparency is not without its drawbacks. Employers face legitimate concerns about confidentiality, commercial sensitivity and the internal tensions that can emerge if pay structures are poorly communicated or misunderstood.

This can be particularly challenging for small businesses dealing with limited HR resources or tight profit margins.

Looking ahead

It appears that the LRA will be using insights shared at the event to inform future policy decisions as work continues to develop the 'Good Jobs' Employment Rights Bill for Northern Ireland.

See: <https://www.lra.org.uk/Latest-News/it-all-about-money>