

Written by 8 June 2026

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!

Why every growing business needs a business plan

You have the idea, the energy, and maybe even your first customers. So why slow down to write a business plan? It can seem like something banks ask for, but not something that really helps you run your business.

However, for small and growing businesses, a well-crafted plan is not red tape. It is one of the most practical tools you can have to grow your business.

A plan forces clarity

Day-to-day, running a business makes for a busy work life, and this can stop you from properly considering some vital questions. For instance, where exactly is your revenue coming from in 12 months? What happens if your biggest customer leaves? How much working capital do you need?

Writing a business plan forces you to answer these questions. The process of articulating your market, your competitors, your pricing and your costs often reveals assumptions you had not realised you were making. That clarity is very valuable and can make a significant difference to your day-to-day decision-making.

It aligns your team

As businesses grow, it becomes more difficult for everyone in the business to work towards the same goals.

A business plan gives everyone a shared reference point: the direction the business is going, what the goals are and the reasoning on key decisions.

A concise, well-structured plan covering your value proposition, target market, financial projections and key milestones can help your team to keep working towards common goals as the business expands.

It's essential for funding

Whether you're approaching a bank for a business loan, pitching to investors, or applying for a grant, a business plan is almost always required.

A strong plan lets lenders and investors know that you understand your business deeply. It allows you to show not just the opportunity, but also how you will manage the risks.

A clear, realistic, well-evidenced plan helps you to stand out. It also protects you. The discipline of putting forecasts and projections together often reveals whether funding is the right choice for your business.

It becomes your measuring stick

A business plan can be a living document that you return to regularly.

You can compare where you said you would be against where you are. For instance:

- Are sales higher than you forecast? If so, you can find out why and do more of it.
- Is it taking longer than expected to find customers? You have an early warning sign that you can act on.

Comparing your plan to reality allows it to become a management tool to help you make better decisions.

Start simple

When urgent tasks demand your attention each day, taking time to write a business plan may seem too much. However, for businesses that are serious about growing, the thinking needed to put together a business plan is never wasted. Start with a single page covering your business model, your target customers, your competitive advantage and your key financial assumptions. Build from there.

If you would like help to craft a business plan to enable your business to grow, why not ask us about our business plan workshop and practical tools? We would be happy to help you!

CMA finds petrol stations are not taking advantage of Middle East conflict

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has released its latest monitoring report that looks at how the Middle East conflict is affecting fuel prices and assesses fuel margins.

The CMA's analysis of April concludes that wholesale costs are the main reason for increases in prices and that retailers are not actively changing their pricing strategies to take advantage of the crisis. However, since supply conditions have improved, they note that they would be concerned if the current high prices persist.

A minority of retailers had increased their margins in March. The CMA has investigated this and determined that this was due to price increases by competitors and setting prices to mitigate supply constraints and inventory pressures.

However, the CMA has noted that average fuel margins remain at historically high levels and April saw a slight increase in them. The average is now 11.3 pence per litre, even though inventory and wholesale costs had somewhat stabilised by the end of April.

They conclude that competition in the retail fuel market is weak, with retailers adopting passive pricing policies rather than actively competing to win customers.

The CMA's Chief Executive, Sarah Cardell, has pointed out that Fuel Finder can help drivers save up to £9 a tank. Fuel Finder allows navigation apps and websites to compare fuel prices so that drivers can locate cheaper petrol.

The CMA has said it will be paying close attention to whether improved supply conditions seen in April are reflected in retail prices. Its next update will be published in August and will consider how the market has developed through to the end of June.

Consultation launched on suspending tariffs on everyday essentials

The government has launched a consultation on suspending tariffs for 125 everyday essential items.

Garlic, avocados, mangoes, nectarines, vegetable oil, baked beans, baked goods, chocolate, sauces, and soft drinks all stand to benefit from targeted cuts to tariffs.

This move would follow the tariff suspension on a selection of agricultural and food products in April 2025.

A suspension of tariffs on certain fertilisers is also being considered to help farmers with rising fertiliser prices caused by the conflict.

The government is seeking views from businesses and other stakeholders on the potential impact of the proposals.

To see full details of the consultation and respond, see:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/call-for-input-on-goods-for-cost-of-living-tariff-suspensions/call-for-input-on-goods-for-cost-of-living-tariff-suspensions>

Pressure selling tactics ruled to be illegal

A High Court order has confirmed that Emma Sleep, a mattress seller, behaved illegally and broke consumer law by using misleading countdown timers, false 'high demand' messages and 'discount claims'.

Concerns were raised about Emma Sleep in 2022 over behaviour that misled shoppers and pressured them into making rushed purchases. This included the use of discounts, countdown clocks and other claims that urgency was required.

Following the Competition and Markets Authority's (CMA) investigation, Emma Sleep was taken to court in 2024 for failing to take action to address the CMA's concerns.

The company has now given binding undertakings to stop its illegal practices and ensure that future claims on its website are clear, accurate and do not create a false impression that people need to act quickly. Emma Sleep will also not be able to use

'limited time' sales or discounts where, after the deadline passes, a similar deal continues.

Hayley Fletcher, Senior Director of Consumer Protection at the CMA, said, "Businesses should be clear on what the law says: using fake countdown clocks on misleading 'discounts' to push people into spending is illegal."

The case against Emma Sleep commenced prior to the CMA receiving new powers in April 2025 that allow it to decide independently whether the law has been broken, without having to go through courts. It can now fine companies up to 10% of their global turnover and secure refunds for affected customers.

The CMA is determined to use its powers and has launched investigations into 14 businesses to date. Its investigation of the AA resulted in £4.2 million in fines and £760,000 in customer refunds.

Emma Sleep faces a further trial starting in early June in relation to reference pricing. The CMA has indicated that it is keen to stamp out illegal practices that take advantage of consumers. Hayley Fletcher said, "Our message to businesses is simple - get your house in order or deal with the consequences."

How can you make AI work effectively for your business?

Artificial Intelligence (AI) continues to make headlines. Anthropic, the company behind chatbot Claude, has filed paperwork in the US to go public. At its last valuation, the company was worth £717 billion.

AI news is not all positive, though. For example, Instagram's AI chatbot is reported to have been tricked by hackers into gaining access to other people's accounts.

The BBC ran a feature article last week showing that many businesses seem to be confused about how best to roll out AI.

In some cases, it seems firms are prioritising the use of AI just so that they can say they are embracing it. Other businesses are looking for staff to use AI but are not always clear on why they are adopting it and how they expect to benefit.

Businesses could be wasting effort and missing out on potential gains. What are some practical suggestions you could use in your business to make sure that AI is working for you?

1. Define your objectives

First, consider what your reason for using AI is.

Are you looking to increase profitability so that you can sell the business? Are you trying to reduce time spent on low-value tasks to increase availability for higher-value tasks?

The clearer you are about why AI is important to your business, the more focused you will be in picking AI tools and promoting their use in ways that will benefit your business.

2. Map your processes before you automate them

Before reaching for an AI tool, document what your current processes actually look like.

If a process is already inefficient or poorly defined, using AI to automate it will often only produce inefficient or poor results faster.

Take time to map out the steps of a process and identify where the bottlenecks are. Then ask whether AI is the right solution or whether a simpler fix might do the job just as well.

3. Start small and measure everything

Pilot AI tools in one team or on one specific task rather than rolling them out across the whole business all at once.

Set clear criteria for what you are expecting to achieve before you begin and then evaluate honestly whether the results justify wider adoption.

What does success look like in concrete terms? Is it hours saved, error rates reduced or revenue generated? If you cannot measure it, you cannot know whether it is working.

4. Get staff onboard

If staff do not understand why a tool is being introduced or how to use it, it is unlikely they will use it effectively.

Anyone using AI tools should be given training on the ethics and risks of using AI, including its limitations. For instance, AI tools can exhibit bias and hallucinate information. They are also designed to flatter the user rather than provide objective information.

Involve staff early in identifying where AI could genuinely help them and make training practical and relevant to their actual role. Staff will be reluctant to use AI if they believe an AI tool is there to replace them, so be clear that the goal is to make their working lives easier, and not to replace them, if that is the case.

5. Assign clear ownership

Someone in the business needs to be responsible for your AI strategy. Without that role being looked after, tools get adopted inconsistently and they are not evaluated properly.

It does not need to be complicated. You might simply need to assign a senior person to take responsibility for reviewing what tools are in use, what they are costing and what they are achieving.

6. Review regularly and be willing to stop

AI tools, like any other business investment, should be reviewed periodically. What made sense 12 months ago may no longer be the best option.

Build in a regular review, quarterly or twice yearly, where you honestly assess which tools are earning their place and which are not.

7. Keep human judgment in the loop

AI can process information, generate options and surface patterns that humans might miss. What it cannot reliably do is exercise judgment, take accountability, or understand the nuances of your customer relationships and business culture.

Make sure that important decisions still involve a human who understands the context, and that your team knows when to trust the AI output and when to question it.

Conclusion

The businesses that will get the most from AI are not necessarily those that adopt it earliest or most enthusiastically. They are the ones that have the clearest view about what problem they are solving, the most disciplined about measuring results, and the most honest when something is not delivering.

Continue to treat AI as you would any other significant business investment, with curiosity, rigour and a healthy dose of scepticism.

Amendments made to 2026 Supporting Small Business Relief

A letter to local authorities confirms amendments that the government has made to the eligibility criteria for Supporting Small Business Relief, a scheme available in England.

Eligibility for the relief has been aligned with the treatment of vacancy and reoccupation under Transitional Relief.

Under the updated rules, a change of ratepayer or a period of vacancy after 31 March 2026 will not affect eligibility for the Supporting Small Business Relief scheme. Eligibility will still be lost if the property becomes occupied by a charity or a Community Amateur Sports Club.

The change has been made to reflect the fact that the relief is intended to mitigate business rate bill increases as a result of revaluation. The change has been backdated to 1 April 2026.