

Written 29 November 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!

Omicron variant - New safety measures announced

Chief Medical Officer Professor Sir Michael McBride said: “The emergence of the omicron variant is a serious and concerning development following the extreme pressures that we have already faced during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic to date. Whilst it is highly likely that there will be cases of the variant in NI at some point it is essential that preventative measures are taken to delay and/or reduce its incursion. This is a rapidly developing situation with the potential need for the addition of more countries to the Red List in the coming days.”

Dr McBride concluded: “It is really important that everyone takes sensible precautions - get a PCR test if you have symptoms. self-isolate when asked and wear your face-covering. Remember to ventilate rooms and please get your vaccine and boosters as soon as you can.”

It is the Department of Health’s intention to align Northern Ireland with the rest of the UK on PCR testing and self-isolation requirements for new arrivals.

Last week South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Eswatini, Zimbabwe and Namibia, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Angola were added to the travel red list.

People aged 40 to 49 can now get a booster vaccine 6 months after their second dose and all young people aged 16 and 17 can now get their second vaccine dose from 12 weeks after their first one. All young people aged 12 to 15 can now get their first vaccine dose.

See: [Update to international travel restrictions | Department of Health \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/2021/11/29/update-to-international-travel-restrictions)

Job vacancies booming and applicants now call the shots!

In their recent labour market review, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) show that in October there were 29.3 million employees, up 160,000 on the revised September 2021.

It is possible that those made redundant at the end of the furlough scheme will be included in the RTI data for a few further months, while they work out their notice period. However, responses to the ONS business survey suggest that the numbers made redundant were likely to be a small share of those still on furlough at the end of September 2021.

The number of job vacancies in August to October 2021 continued to rise to a new record of 1,172,000, an increase of 388,000 from the pre-coronavirus pandemic January to March 2020 level, with 15 of the 18 industry sectors showing record highs. Both single month vacancies and Adzuna's online job advert estimates reached record levels of vacancy numbers in October 2021.



There are a number of actions you can take to make your business attractive to new staff. In addition to reviewing your pay and conditions to be as competitive as possible, these include:

- Tasking recruitment as a permanent process;
- Regularly asking existing staff, customers and suppliers for introductions;
- Offering incentives for referrals;
- Make sure you are running constant online social media and local advertisements;
- Embracing flexibility in hours and location in your business;
- Introducing a “Golden Hello” and loyalty bonuses for length of service (typically one to three years);
- Advertising testimonials from existing staff;
- Using government initiatives for apprentices;
- Make your company and the job sound as attractive as possible by outlining the position to sound prestigious and challenging. These two factors are big incentives for bright potential candidates;
- Knowing that job satisfaction comes from feeling respected and having the opportunity to learn new things and excel in the face of obstacles when advertising the role; and
- Convey your businesses personality so potential employees get a feel for what it would be like to work for you;

Recruiting new employees is tough just now so be different! For example, some employers are now offering “Wellbeing leave” in addition to the usual holiday package. If you want to recruit more you have to get serious about the process and be on it 24/7, 365!

Useful guidance on the procedures for recruitment can be seen in the ACAS guide “Recruiting staff” which can be seen here: [Recruiting staff \(acas.org.uk\)](https://www.acas.org.uk/guidance/recruiting-staff)

Reimbursing Fuel for Company cars from 1 December 2021

As the result of recent increases in fuel prices, HMRC have increased the advisory fuel rates that apply for the reimbursement of employees' private fuel for their company cars. The

same rates apply when the employer reimburses employees for fuel used for business journeys in their company car.

The new rates apply from 1 December 2021, but you can continue to use the previous rates for up to 1 month from the date the new rates apply. Note that the electric car reimbursement rate also increases from 4p to 5p a mile.

Where there has been a change, the previous rate is shown in brackets: -

Engine Size	Petrol	Diesel	LPG
1400cc or less	13p (12p)		9p (7p)
1600cc or less		11p (10p)	
1401cc to 2000cc	15p (14p)		10p (8p)
1601 to 2000cc		13p (12p)	
Over 2000cc	22p (20p)	16p (15p)	15p (12p)

Note that for hybrid cars you must use the petrol or diesel rate which may differ significantly from the actual fuel costs. The advisory electricity rate for fully electric cars is 5 pence per mile (was 4p).

Employees should carefully consider whether it is advantageous having private fuel provided for their company car. Remember that the P11d benefit for having private fuel provided for a company car in 2021/22 is £24,600 multiplied by the CO2 emissions percentage for that vehicle, rising to £25,300 for 2022/23.

For example, a director driving a Mercedes Benz E200 saloon company car (CO2 emissions 169g per km) would be assessed on $37\% \times £24,600 = £9,102$ for 2021/22. If they are a higher rate taxpayer that would mean £3,641 tax. That is an awful lot of private fuel!

On top of that there would be 13.8% Class 1A NIC payable by the employer = £1,256 (15.05% next year = £1,409).

Made Smarter Innovation: Sustainable Smart Factory

UK registered businesses and organisations can apply for a share of up to £20m for digital innovation projects that will improve the resource efficiency and energy efficiency of manufacturing processes in factories. The Competition closes 26 January 2022.

The Made Smarter Innovation programme, delivered by Innovate UK, part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), has launched a new collaborative research and development competition focusing on sustainable smart factories. The £20 million Sustainable Smart Factory competition presents an opportunity to launch a wide range of projects that bring a significant benefit to the planet, helping to achieve net zero.

Consortiums of UK registered business and organisations can apply for a share of up to £20 million for digital innovation projects that will reduce the carbon emissions of manufacturing processes in factories. The aim of the competition is to support the development of digital innovations to improve the sustainability of manufacturing processes, resulting in either reduced material or reduced energy consumption.

Applications are encouraged from consortiums comprising a mix of manufacturing and technology development capabilities working together on innovative developments or novel applications of digital technologies. Projects can:

- range from £1 million to £8 million
- run for up to two years
- tackle themes such as reducing in-process material losses, better sequencing manufacturing operations to reduce energy consumption

See: [Competition overview - Made Smarter Innovation: Sustainable Smart Factory - Innovation Funding Service \(apply-for-innovation-funding.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.apply-for-innovation-funding.service.gov.uk/competition-overview/made-smarter-innovation-sustainable-smart-factory)

Start Up Energy Transition Award 2022

The Start Up Energy Transition (SET) Award is an international competition for startups and young companies worldwide who are working on ideas affecting global energy transition and climate change.

In the last four years, the award has received more than 2,300 applications from 102 countries. SET is powered by the German Energy Agency (dena), in cooperation with the World Energy Council.

The five categories of the fifth round of the SET Award cover the entire clean energy spectrum:

- Clean Energy Generation
- Demand-side Innovation
- Energy Distribution and Storage
- Smart Mobility & Transportation

- Quality Energy Access & SDG-7

Benefits of participating and prizes in the SET Award 2022 include:

- joining the global platform of innovation leaders
- the top 100 ranked applicants will be featured to stakeholders across the globe, and also receive a free ticket to the SET Tech Festival
- 15 finalists will receive return flights to Berlin and accommodation for 2 representatives of the start-up to attend the SET Tech Festival
- category winners will receive up to €10,000 prize money

The closing date for applications is 31 January 2022.

See: [SET Award - Start Up Energy Transition \(startup-energy-transition.com\)](https://startup-energy-transition.com)

Working Minds campaign launches

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) are calling for a culture change across Britain's workplaces where recognising and responding to the signs of stress becomes as routine as managing workplace safety.

Work-related stress is now the number one cause of employee sickness absence, with major factors causing work-related stress including workload pressures - tight deadlines, too much responsibility and a lack of managerial support. Employers, particularly smaller ones, are not aware of their legal duties or how to spot the signs of stress.

Working Minds raises awareness about how to recognise and respond to the signs of stress and reminds employers of their legal duty to protect workers and support good mental health to help people to stay well. The organisation also provides small businesses with relevant information and practical tools.

See: [Working Minds - Work Right to keep Britain safe \(campaign.gov.uk\)](https://campaign.gov.uk)

HMRC webinars - November and December 2021

There are a number of webinars available this November and December from HMRC that will help [employers with payroll](#), give the [self-employed an understanding of key taxes](#) that affect them and help those [individuals and businesses trading outside Northern Ireland](#) get to grips with import and export procedures. The webinars are free and last around an hour.

See: [HMRC videos, webinars and email alerts - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

SBC late payments survey

The Office of the Small Business Commissioner (SBC) has a remit across late payments and changing the culture of late payments in the UK. Small firms complain about late payments as one of their top concerns and cite them as the reason they are in debt.

The SBC would like to hear from small businesses to get a clearer picture, if possible, of how small firm growth and productivity is being held back by poor payment practices.

The survey closes on 15 December 2021.

See: [SBC late payments survey - Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy - Citizen Space](#)

New laws and code to resolve remaining COVID-19 commercial rent debts

New laws and a Code of Practice are being introduced to resolve the remaining commercial rent debts accrued because of the pandemic.

The Code sets out that, in the first instance, tenants unable to pay in full should negotiate with their landlord in the expectation that the landlord waives some or all rent arrears where they are able to do so.

From 25 March 2022, new laws introduced in the Commercial Rent (Coronavirus) Bill will establish a legally-binding arbitration process for commercial landlords and tenants who have not already reached an agreement, following the principles in the Code of Practice.

The Bill will apply to commercial rent debts related to the mandated closure of certain businesses such as pubs, gyms and restaurants during the pandemic. Debts accrued at other times will not be in scope.

These laws will come into force in England and Wales, and Northern Ireland will have a power in the Bill to introduce similar legislation.

See: [New laws and code to resolve remaining COVID-19 commercial rent debts - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Green Economy Support Programme for Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon

Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council's new Green Economy Support Programme supports businesses in the area on their innovation journey to a greener economy.

The programme aims to support micro and small businesses to reduce their carbon footprint and develop their knowledge and skills around green energy opportunities. It also offers one-to-one mentoring and a range of webinars. The programme also provides one-to-one support to businesses who want to take action to reduce their carbon footprint and develop their knowledge and skills around green energy opportunities.

Participants will receive assistance to produce a net zero carbon energy plan, tailored to their business needs, highlighting practical steps to build resilience, strengthen competitiveness and realise carbon, energy and costs savings.

To be considered for a place on the programme, your business must:

- be based in the Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council area

- employ less than 50 people

See: [Green Economy Support Programme for Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon \(nibusinessinfo.co.uk\)](https://nibusinessinfo.co.uk)

Exporting Founders programme

Exporting Founders can help you get your start-up business ready for the requirements and realities of cross-border and international trade. This 12-week virtual programme, delivered by Young Enterprise NI, is funded by the Department for the Economy.

Through a series of practical workshops, learning and panels, industry experts will equip you with the skills, knowledge and connections to demystify cross-border trade that will help you export and sell globally.

Exporting Founders is relevant for digital, product or service-focused early-stage entrepreneurs or anyone thinking about starting up and exploring new markets.

You will also have the opportunity to showcase your start-ups and ideas and help to join the dots to the people, places and programmes that can support you with your cross-border and international trade ambitions.

Exporting Founders will be delivered via two programmes in 2021-22:

- Programme 1 will begin in late November - you need to apply by 30 November 2021
- Programme 2 will begin in early January 2022 - you do not need to have enrolled in Programme 1 to join Programme 2

See: [Exporting Founders](#)

Prepare for new bans on F-gases

New bans in Northern Ireland legislation are due to come into force on 1 January 2022. These may affect businesses if they use commercial refrigeration equipment.

The bans will apply to businesses which place on the market the following two categories of refrigeration equipment containing hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs, a type of F-gas):

- new refrigerators and freezers for commercial use (hermetically sealed equipment) that contain HFCs with global warming potential (GWP) of 150 or more
- new multipack centralised refrigeration systems for commercial use with a rated cooling capacity of 40 kW or more that contain, or whose functioning relies upon, fluorinated greenhouse gases with GWP of 150 or more, except in the primary refrigerant circuit of cascade systems where fluorinated greenhouse gases with a GWP of less than 1,500 may be used

The aim on the bans is to limit NI's emissions of these types of F-gas, which have a very high GWP, and can exacerbate the effects of climate change.

Businesses that do not comply with the 2022 bans will be breaking the law and will be liable for enforcement action.

See: [Prepare for new bans on F-gases \(nibusinessinfo.co.uk\)](https://nibusinessinfo.co.uk)

Northern Ireland Industry Market Access Programme

Tourism Northern Ireland and Tourism Ireland have partnered to support Northern Ireland tourism business to secure international business for future years.

The Northern Ireland Industry Market Access Programme (NI IMAP) is funded through the Tourism Recovery Action Plan and will operate on a pilot basis from 4 October 2021 to 31 March 2022.

The programme specifically aims to support overseas business-to-business (B2B) activity in group leisure; meetings, incentives, conferences and events (MICE); golf and luxury.

Applications are open until 30 November 2021.

See: [Northern Ireland Industry Market Access Programme \(nibusinessinfo.co.uk\)](https://nibusinessinfo.co.uk)

Coronavirus: New Apprenticeship Incentive Scheme

The New Apprenticeship Incentive Scheme is available to all employers to support the recruitment of new apprentices.

This incentive is available to all employers to support the recruitment of new apprentices. As an employer, you will be eligible for up to £3,000 for each new apprenticeship opportunity created from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2022.

See: [Coronavirus: New Apprenticeship Incentive Scheme \(nibusinessinfo.co.uk\)](https://nibusinessinfo.co.uk)

Childcare Temporary Closure Support Fund - October to December 2021 period

The COVID-19 Childcare Temporary Closure Support Fund will provide continued support for childcare providers who have had to close temporarily due to a COVID-19 related incident within their provision.

The Support Fund has been extended for the period October to December 2021.

Those eligible to apply include registered childminders, day-care providers, school age childcare providers, crèches and playgroups who are registered and have been operational during the period 1 October 2021 to 31 December 2021.

See: [Covid-19 Related Closure Phase 5 — Early Years - the organisation for young children \(early-years.org\)](https://early-years.org)

Free support programmes for Newry, Mourne and Down businesses

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council's suite of business support programmes aims to provide support to businesses in the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council area.

A key benefit of signing up for the NMD Business programmes is that you will be partnered with a dedicated expert to offer practical advice to support your business needs.

To qualify for these programmes, your business must be located within the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council area, employ less than 50 people and have growth potential over the next few years.

See: [Home - NMD Business](#)

Minister announces the publication of the Culture, Arts & Heritage Recovery Taskforce Report

Communities Minister, Deirdre Hargey, has published the report of the Culture, Arts & Heritage Recovery Taskforce.

The Taskforce, established by the Minister in May 2021, has made nine recommendations to support reopening and recovery in the short-term and proposals for the focus of a longer term strategy for culture, the arts and heritage.

Minister Hargey has thanked the Taskforce chair, Rotha Johnston, and the expert panel members and confirmed that work on implementation of the main recommendations has already begun.

See: [Minister announces the publication of the Culture, Arts & Heritage Recovery Taskforce Report | Department for Communities \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

Public transport passengers must wear a face covering to fight spread of COVID-19

Face coverings are mandatory on public transport as part of efforts in place to reduce the risk of transmission of Covid-19.

Passengers travelling on public transport services in Northern Ireland are required to wear a face covering. Face coverings are also required in public transport stations.

Infrastructure Minister, Nichola Mallon, has again reminded the travelling public of the importance of wearing face coverings on public transport including buses, trains and the Strangford Ferry.

See: [Public transport passengers must wear a face covering to fight spread of COVID-19 | Department for Infrastructure \(infrastructure-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

Statement from the Executive on Covid-19 – action needed now to keep our society open and safe

Vaccination

Please take up the vaccine, including the booster, when it is offered to you. The evidence on the benefits of vaccination is unequivocal. And the statistics are stark.

Unvaccinated adults aged under 50 are almost 11 times more likely to need hospitalisation from Covid-19. Unvaccinated individuals aged 50 and over are four times more likely to die from Covid-19 than those who are fully vaccinated.

Work from home

We are also strengthening the message that people should work from home where possible. More people working from home will help to reduce the risk of transmission both inside and outside the workplace.

We recognise that this may present challenges in some work areas and ask employees to work from home where they can and advise employers to support this where possible.

Making safer choices

It is vital that every person makes safer choices that will protect you, your family, the wider community and the health service.

Every step counts. As well as taking up the vaccine and working from home where possible, we ask everyone to:

- Limit your social contacts – this will minimise opportunities for the virus to spread.
- Meet outdoors where you can – it's safer than meeting indoors.
- If meeting indoors, make sure the space is well ventilated – good ventilation is critical in reducing risk of transmission when indoors.
- Wear a face covering in crowded or indoor settings – face coverings remain a vital mitigation and it is critical that people continue to use them in all circumstances where they are required.
- Keep washing your hands or use a sanitiser.

See: [Statement from the Executive on Covid-19 – action needed now to keep our society open and safe | The Executive Office \(executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

Town Centre Experience Fund for Causeway, Coast and Glens

This fund encourages traders/town centre stakeholders to introduce new experiences, activities, marketing or events within town centres

Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council's Town Centre Experience Fund aims to bring different ideas together to develop activities which can improve the experience for town centre users.

The fund will provide up to a maximum of £4,000 per project for groups of traders/town centre stakeholders to work together to introduce new experiences, activities, marketing or event development within their respective town centres.

The grant will cover the four main hubs of Ballycastle, Ballymoney, Coleraine and Limavady.

The town centres that will be covered are Ballykelly, Bushmills, Cushendall, Dungiven, Garvagh, Kilrea, Portrush and Portstewart.

The deadline for online applications is 12 noon on Monday 13 December 2021.

See: [Town Centre Experience Fund - Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council \(causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk\)](https://www.causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk)