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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 marks one year since deploying its first COVID-19 vaccine

Last year the UK administered the first COVID-19 vaccine in the world, outside of clinical trials. On 8 December 2020, 90-year-old Margaret Keenan received a Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine at University Hospital in Coventry, administered by Matron May Parsons.



Since then the vaccination programme has been considered a success with more than 120 million doses administered, and the UK has now administered more than 22 million third doses.

Last week the executive made a statement on tackling the Omicron variant and the next steps in their preparations to tackle it.

See: [Joint statement by the Executive – tackling the COVID-19 Omicron variant | The Executive Office \(executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

File Companies House accounts early and online to avoid delays

December is always a busy time with many companies due to file accounts with Companies House (CH) before the end of the month.

As CH are continuing to follow the UK government guidance for working safely during coronavirus (COVID-19), this means it could take longer than usual to process paper documents sent by post.

Their online services are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week - and there are inbuilt checks to help you avoid mistakes.

To file online, you'll need your [company authentication code](#). If you need to request a new code, you should allow up to 5 days for this to arrive at the company's registered office.

You should only send paper accounts if your company cannot file online. Accounts filed on paper need to be manually checked and processed by CH teams during [office opening hours](#).

See: [File Companies House accounts early and online to avoid delays - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Food Standards Authority (FSA) launches new food fraud resilience tool

The [National Food Crime Unit \(NFCU\)](#) have developed this Food Fraud Resilience Self-Assessment Tool to provide support, guidance, and advice to food businesses on fraud and food fraud. The tool is designed for food business operators in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The self-assessment tool covers different areas that businesses will need to be aware of so that they can better identify and address process issues.

Food crime is defined as serious fraud and related criminality in food supply chains, including any activity impacting on drink and animal feed. It can be seriously harmful to consumers, food businesses and the wider food industry.

The tool is made up of 7 sections and provides advice for countering food fraud. These questions will help you to evaluate your business and identify areas for improvement. The tool will not provide you with a final score.

This can be completed anonymously, and any data submitted will not be collected in a way that could identify you. The tool should take no more than 15 minutes to use.

See: [Food fraud resilience self-assessment tool | Food Standards Agency](#)

Help to Grow: Digital scheme

Help to Grow: Digital is a new UK-wide scheme to help small and medium size businesses (SMEs) adopt digital technologies that are proven to increase productivity.

From December 2021, the scheme will offer SMEs free and impartial advice on how technology can help their business. A new online platform will be set up to help them to:

- identify their digital technology needs
- assess technology purchasing options
- implement new technologies in their operations

Eligible businesses will also be able claim a voucher covering up to 50 per cent of the costs of approved digital software, up to a maximum of £5,000.

These vouchers are expected to be available for software that helps businesses:

- build customer relationships and increase sales
- make the most of selling online
- manage their accounts and finances digitally

The voucher will be available to UK businesses that:

- are registered at Companies House
- employ between 5 and 249 employees
- have been trading for more than 12 months
- are purchasing the approved software for the first time

See: [Help to Grow – Take your business to the next level \(campaign.gov.uk\)](https://www.campaign.gov.uk/help-to-grow)

Africa Investment Conference 2022

The UK Department for International Trade is inviting businesses to attend the Africa Investment Conference on 20 January 2022. This virtual event will take place on the second anniversary of the UK-Africa Investment Summit hosted by the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, in London.

The Africa Investment Conference will provide a platform for UK and African businesses to connect. It will encourage deal origination, facilitate networking opportunities and raise visibility and interest in African opportunities within an impact and clean growth context. Delegates will be able to hear directly from UK companies about doing business across Africa. The conference is supported by the Africa Investors Group, a grouping of some of the UK's largest investors in Africa.

See: [Home \(great.gov.uk\)](https://www.great.gov.uk/home)

Construction firms asked to take a Safety Reboot in 2022

The Construction Employer's Federation (CEF) health and safety initiative Safety Reboot returns for a second year in January 2022. The month-long program aims to encourage construction companies to stop work for about 15 minutes, once a week throughout January, to take time to focus on key areas of health and safety.

Resources on eight topics, developed by the CEF Health and Safety committee last year, are available as they cover key areas of construction health and safety. Question packs and discussion aids on three new topics for 2022 - asbestos, respirable crystalline silica and underground services - have also been developed to increase the scope of the initiative.

The resources should be used to start conversation and interaction between the workforce on issues that they encounter every day on site.

See: [Safety Reboot 2022 Resources \(cefni.co.uk\)](https://www.cefni.co.uk/safety-reboot-2022-resources)

UK Tradeshow Programme

The UK Tradeshow Programme offers government support to help UK businesses successfully attend or exhibit at overseas trade shows.

UK businesses exporting, or thinking about exporting, can apply for support to:

- exhibit at, or attend, approved overseas trade shows and conferences
- potentially receive grants to offset some costs

Applications to exhibit at overseas trade shows were open from 29 November 2021.

Applications to attend overseas trade shows (without exhibiting) are open from January 2022.

Exhibiting at overseas trade shows can help you gain essential market knowledge and increase your:

- company's brand awareness amongst overseas buyers
- business sales by securing new customers

This guidance is for the exhibition element of the programme. It will be updated with more information on attendance support in January 2022.

See: [UK Tradeshow Programme - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/programmes/uk-tradeshows)

Intellectual property office (IPO) launches call for views on standard essential patents

Responses will inform how the SEPs framework supports innovation, and whether change is needed.

A patent that protects technology which is essential to implementing a standard is known as a Standard Essential Patent (SEP). Without using the methods or devices protected by these SEPs, it is difficult for a manufacturer to create standard compliant products, such as smartphones or tablets.

The government is seeking views as to whether SEPs framework is functioning efficiently and strikes the right balance for all entities involved.

The purpose of the call is to better understand how the current SEPs framework encourages innovation and promotes competition. A wide range of evidence is sought on the following:

- the link between SEPs, innovation and competition and how these elements interrelate with each other
- the functioning of the market, and whether there is an imbalance between the licensor and licensee
- transparency in the SEPs ecosystem
- the efficiency of SEPs licensing
- functioning of the patent framework and FRAND litigation

The call for views will run for 12 weeks, closing on 1 March. After it closes, the government will assess the responses it receives and publish a summary of responses. These responses will inform the government's decision on any next steps and action that may be required.

See: [IPO launches call for views on Standard Essential Patents \(SEPs\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

2022 MacRobert Award opens for applications

The MacRobert Award is the UK's longest-running and most prestigious national prize for engineering innovation.

It honours the winning organisation with a gold medal, and the team members with a cash prize of £50,000. The presentation of the award recognises:

- outstanding innovation
- tangible societal benefit
- proven commercial success

The award is open to engineering innovations in any area of engineering, applied science, technology or medicine.

Past winners have included the engineers behind innovations such as the Pegasus jet engine, catalytic converters, the roof of the Millennium Dome and intelligent prosthetic limbs. In 2019, the award went to a Belfast-based Bombardier team for their innovative resin-infused advanced composite aircraft wing that minimises the environmental impact of commercial jets.

See: [How to apply - Royal Academy of Engineering \(raeng.org.uk\)](#)

HMRC customers with Post Office card accounts given extra time to switch accounts

Customers who currently receive HMRC benefit payments into a Post Office card account will be given extra time to switch their account, HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) has confirmed.

HMRC recognises the vital financial support tax credits, Child Benefit and Guardian's Allowance can provide to individuals and families; and wants to give them every opportunity possible to receive the benefits to which they are entitled.

The department has arranged a one-off extension to the contract with the Post Office allowing customers until 5 April 2022 to provide alternative account details to HMRC.

This means that the 13,000 customers, who are still to notify HMRC, will temporarily be able to continue to receive their payments into their Post Office account, giving them extra time to set up new accounts and notify the department.

HMRC is still encouraging those benefitting from the extension to switch their account at the earliest opportunity.

See: [HMRC customers with Post Office card accounts given extra time to switch accounts - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Driving and riding safely for work – updated guidance from HSE

For most people, driving or riding will be the most dangerous work activity they do. Around one third of all road traffic collisions (RTCs) in Britain involve someone driving or riding as part of their job and countless other RTCs involve people travelling to or from their workplace.

Although the risks cannot be completely controlled, employers or companies, including those in the construction sector, who engage drivers and riders must take all reasonable steps to manage these risks and do everything reasonably practicable to protect people from harm in the same way as they would in a fixed workplace.

The Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) new webpages have been created following HSE and Department of Transport consultation with stakeholders.

They contain clear, simple guidance for employers and those who engage drivers and riders on how to make sure the journey, driver and vehicle are safe. For workers and those who drive and ride for work, it outlines their responsibilities.

See: [Driving and riding safely for work - HSE](#)

The Circular Future Fund: The Million Pound Challenge

In partnership with Hubbub, the John Lewis Partnership is launching a £1 million fund to support trailblazing ideas and innovations that can accelerate the transition towards a more circular economy.

Whether it's rethinking waste with new products or materials, finding creative ways to shift consumer mindsets or developing new business models and services, then the Challenge would like to hear from you.

The fund will provide grants between £150,000 to £300,000. If you would like to be involved, then complete your application by 9 January 2022.

See: [The Circular Future Fund — Home](#)

ABC Business Awards 2022

Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council has launched the ABC Business Awards 2022 to give local companies the opportunity to be recognised for their hard work and commitment to business excellence.

The event will champion business leaders, employers, innovators and entrepreneurs from across the local economy.

The awards ceremony will take place on Thursday 24 February 2022 at the Seagoe Hotel, Portadown.

See: [Business Awards - Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council \(armaghbanbridgecraigavon.gov.uk\)](https://www.armaghbanbridgecraigavon.gov.uk)

STEM gender equality webinars

The Equality Commission are hosting a number of webinars to promote gender equality in the science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) industries

The webinars take place in February and March 2022 and will give employers an insight in how to take practical steps to address gender inequality with a focus specifically on STEM industries.

See: [STEM gender equality webinars \(nibusinessinfo.co.uk\)](https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk)

Grant funding and mentoring support for female entrepreneurs

The Female Founders Funding Opportunity seeks to support female entrepreneurs bring their innovative business idea to market with grant funding and business mentoring support.

Techstart Ventures and Women in Business have partnered together to invite females across Northern Ireland, with an innovative business idea, to apply for a grant of up to £35,000 to help kickstart their business.

Whether you are an individual with an exciting, novel idea or an established business looking to explore a new product or market, you could receive a grant to support your innovation. Successful applicants will also receive a business mentor through the Women in Business mentoring programme.

See: [Female Founders Funding Opportunity | Techstart Ventures Grants Northern Ireland \(techstartgrants.com\)](https://www.techstartgrants.com)

New support programme for Newry, Mourne and Down

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council has launched a new support programme beginning in early 2022 for SMEs and entrepreneurs.

As part of the NMD Business Growth programme, the specially designed Strategise for Success Programme provides assistance to participants on the need to have a clear and simple plan in place when it comes to growing your business successfully.

Expert mentors will help businesses to focus on helping you understand what a business strategy is, how useful it is and how to plan your business strategy and practices moving forward.

The Strategise for Success Programme involves tailored one-to-one mentoring and targeted online workshops, focusing on business strategy and planning a strategy for the future.

See: [Strategise for Success - new support programme for Newry, Mourne and Down \(nibusinessinfo.co.uk\)](https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk)

COVID-19 Supply Chain Resilience and Development Framework - third call

Support is available to help Northern Ireland businesses improve their supply chain resilience and competitiveness

Invest Northern Ireland (Invest NI) has issued a third call for applicants to the COVID-19 Supply Chain Resilience and Development Framework (SCRDF). The framework supports businesses to improve their supply chain resilience and competitiveness.

It is open to manufacturers and providers of internationally traded services, based and operating in Northern Ireland, who manage a supply chain as part of their business or who are involved in the extended supply chain.

The framework primarily provides specialist advisory support to help businesses:

- identify supply chain risks and appropriate mitigations
- reduce costs
- improve competitiveness
- identify supply chain opportunities
- develop supply chain capability

Depending on a business' circumstances, financial assistance towards the salary costs of a dedicated supply chain worker may also be available.

See: [COVID-19 Supply Chain Resilience and Development Framework \(SCRDF\) | Invest Northern Ireland \(investni.com\)](https://investni.com/COVID-19-Supply-Chain-Resilience-and-Development-Framework-SCRDF)

Open Data Innovation and Outreach Fund - third round is now open

The Department of Finance has opened a new round of its Innovation and Outreach Fund to encourage the use of open data - that is data that can be freely used, re-used and redistributed by anyone.

£40,000 is available in this round of the fund to support projects based around:

- Supporting the innovative use of data available on [OpenDataNI portal](#), either using open data on its own or in combination with other sources of data. This can include developing apps, interactive data visualisations and/or other products or services with open data.
- Open data based advocacy, outreach and engagement activities that seek to promote the use of open data. For example, workshops, hackathons, seminars, meet-ups and groups, conferences etc.
- Transparency, openness and unlocking value in data – use of open data to promote transparency and bring benefit to public society.

Applications are open to any individual or organisation in Northern Ireland.

Applicants are not restricted to applying in one category only and may apply under each – you should complete a separate application form for each category.

See: [The Open Data NI Innovation and Outreach Fund | Department of Finance \(finance-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

High Street Scheme: guidance for businesses

The High Street Scheme has been extended and will officially close on 19 December 2021, when all cards will be deactivated, and no more spend on the card can occur.

The advice for businesses has been updated.

See: [High Street Scheme: guidance for businesses \(nibusinessinfo.co.uk\)](#)

Accessible services webinars

The Equality Commission's Every Customer Counts webinar series aims to help businesses make their services more accessible for disabled customers. The webinars are part of the Equality Commission's Every Customer Counts initiative, which encourages businesses to consider how open their services currently are to disabled people.

The Equality Commission would encourage service providers to attend all four webinars as they will provide a useful journey, from awareness of the common issues affecting disabled customers, right through to practical action that will help businesses to boost their customer base. Each webinar lasts around 40 minutes, and they are free to attend.

See: [ECNI - Every Customer Counts - promoting accessible services \(equalityni.org\)](#)

Ambassador Circle business events initiative

A new initiative, the Ambassador Circle, has been launched to target and significantly grow the number of international business events hosted in Northern Ireland; and promote Northern Ireland as a leading business and events destination.

The Ambassador Circle will bring together business and academic leaders in sectors such as:

- advanced manufacturing
- technology
- life and health sciences
- food and drink
- financial, professional and business services

The group will help identify, target and attract key business events and conferences to Northern Ireland. It is a joint initiative between Invest Northern Ireland, Visit Belfast, Tourism NI and Visit Derry.

See: [Ambassador Circle - Meet Belfast](#)