

Written 13 December 2021

BUSINESS NEWS ENGLAND

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!

Prime Minister confirms move to Plan B in England

The Prime Minister confirmed last week that England will move to Plan B following the rapid spread of the Omicron variant in the UK.



The most recent data suggests that Omicron has a very high growth rate and is spreading rapidly. As seen in previous waves, a swift rise in cases can lead to a rapid rise in hospitalisations, which will quickly lead to pressure on the NHS.

As a result of this data the government has confirmed Plan B measures will come into force while more data on vaccine efficacy and disease severity is assessed. Plan B was set out in September and will help to slow the spread of the variant and reduce the chances of the NHS coming under unsustainable pressure, while buying time to deliver more boosters.

The government will continue to look closely at all the emerging data, but vaccines remain the best line of defence and it is now more vital than ever that those who are unvaccinated come forward.

Testing will also be a vital tool in controlling the spread given the likely increased transmissibility of Omicron. As there is now demonstrated community transmission of Omicron, the government intend to introduce daily contact tests for contacts of confirmed positive cases instead of the ten-day self-isolation period.

The government advises that everyone should test using a lateral flow device, particularly before entering a high-risk setting involving people you wouldn't normally come into contact with, or when visiting a vulnerable person. Lateral flow devices remain free of charge and can be collected from local pharmacies.

From Friday 10 December, face coverings will become compulsory in most public indoor venues, such as cinemas, theatres and places of worship. There will be exemptions in

venues where it is not practical to wear one, such as when you are eating, drinking or exercising. For that reason, face masks will not be required in hospitality settings.

From today, Monday 13 December, those who can are advised to work from home.

From Wednesday 15 December, and subject to parliamentary approval, the NHS Covid Pass on the NHS App will become mandatory for entry into nightclubs and settings where large crowds gather – including unseated indoor events with 500 or more attendees, unseated outdoor events with 4,000 or more attendees and any event with 10,000 or more attendees.

People will be able to demonstrate proof of two vaccine doses via the app. Having considered the evidence since the emergence of Omicron, proof of a negative lateral flow test will also be accepted.

The government will keep the data under review. The regulations set to expire six weeks after implementation, with a review after three weeks.

A full list of guidance on these changes is available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-response-autumn-and-winter-plan-2021/covid-19-response-autumn-and-winter-plan-2021#plan-b>

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.

In light of the new Omicron variant and following advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), the government is expanding the booster programme to all adults over 18 and announced that all eligible people will be offered a top-up jab by the end of January, as well as halving the minimum gap between second doses and boosters.

The NHS confirmed an expansion of the booster programme, with the National Booking Service now open to all those aged over 40 to book their jabs. The dose interval has also

been shortened from six months to three months, with those eligible now able to book a month in advance – two months after their second dose.

All adults in England are to be offered a booster jab by the end of the year. The devolved administrations have also agreed to accelerate vaccinations.

See: [UK marks one year since deploying world's first COVID-19 vaccine - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-marks-one-year-since-deploying-worlds-first-covid-19-vaccine)
(www.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](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/file-companies-house-accounts-early-and-online-to-avoid-delays)
(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 \(campaign.gov.uk\)](#)

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)

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)

Freeports – Government Publish Maps of Designated Areas

There are numerous tax incentives to encourage businesses to locate in Freeport Areas:-

- SDLT exemption on purchase of land and buildings
- 10% Structures and buildings allowance for costs of construction/refurbishment
- 100% enhanced capital allowances on plant and machinery
- Exemption from employers NICs for staff earning up to £25,000
- Special Customs Duty and VAT rules

The precise location of 4 of the 8 designated areas in England have now been clarified with the publication of detailed maps:

Thames: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/maps-of-thames-freeport-tax-sites>

Teesside: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/maps-of-teesside-freeport-tax-sites>

Humber: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/maps-of-humber-freeport-tax-sites>

East: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/maps-of-freeport-east-tax-sites>

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/guidance/uk-tradeshows-programme)

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 \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/ipo-launches-call-for-views-on-standard-essential-patents-seps)

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 \(raeng.org.uk\)](https://www.raeng.org.uk/apply)

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 \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/hmrc-customers-with-post-office-card-accounts-given-extra-time-to-switch-accounts)

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](https://www.hse.gov.uk/roadtraffic/)

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](https://www.jlp.com/circularfuturefund/)