



biz4Biz IS A VOICE FOR BUSINESS

biz4Biz was created in 2009 followed by our ConneXions business networking group. We launched our first Insight magazine back in August 2014 and our phenomenally successful biz4Biz Awards programme in 2017.

biz4Biz has become a well-established and highly respected brand that provides a voice for the local business community. As part of our continued growth, we have expanded our activities to cover Herts, Beds, Bucks, Essex, and Cambs. We are now able to offer our clients the

ability to market their businesses via our Let's Work Together integrated digital marketing package which includes:

- **Advertising and editorial in our magazines:**
 - **Insight – East of England**
 - **Sustainable Biz - National**
 - **Manufacturing Biz – National & International**
- **Regular biz4Biz ConneXions networking meetings**
- **Regular WebeXions webinars**
- **Regular Newsletters**

- **Blog posts**
- **Email blasts**
- **Video content in the magazine and on the website**
- **Social Media posts**

In addition, we can offer specialised website promotion via our focused expert pages. These would be suitable for a wide range of professional services companies in accountancy, legal, HR, financial services, property services, corporate finance, IT, marketing, and insurance amongst others.

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A Letter from our Editor

I am pleased to be able to write these notes and welcome you all to our first edition of Insight for 2026.

It truly was a breathless end to 2025 and this year has started in a similar vein.

At biz4Biz it was little surprise that all of our focus was on delivering yet another remarkable Hertfordshire Business Awards.

The build up of course provides a perfect marketing opportunity for all of those entered and who go through our judging process.

We then of course had a superb evening of entertainment, capped by fully deserved awards being presented to our winners, along with the chance for all our shortlisted candidates to bask in their own success as well. And finally a look at our impressive list of sponsors and the

amazing networking opportunities the night affords shows why it is a first date in the diary for local companies.

It's little surprise that this year's event is already deep into the planning stage - but more of that soon!!!

Now, of course, we are also already delivering on our plans for the current year. The busiest part of any year for many businesses, January to March is a time to hit the ground running, and deliver the success for the first quarter which may have been planned some 12 months or more ago.

A look at our business news in this edition shows once again that this region is punching massively above its weight. Home to global names across a range of industries, this area shows that whether you are the biggest player or the smallest of kitchen table enterprises, both inspiration and perspiration is plentiful.

We love to hear these stories and to be able to tell you all about successes that are taking place.

But as a final reminder please do not hesitate to get in touch, we would love to share your stories and messages to our vast readership in 2026 - it's the good news everyone is simply waiting to hear!

DARREN ISTED
Insight Editor



"We love to hear these stories and to be able to tell you all about successes that are taking place"



You can follow us @biz4biz for news, articles and updates on our current stories. Our articles get posted regularly to 2400 followers!



biz4Biz

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A voice for business. We publish the Insight and Sustainable Biz Magazines, organise the biz4Biz Awards and run the ConneXions networking groups.



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Women in Sales:

IT'S TIME TO CLOSE THE GAP

Across the UK and globally, businesses are under growing pressure to drive revenue. Customer service roles are being reduced, while demand for skilled sales professionals continues to rise. Yet one critical group remains underrepresented in sales teams across almost every sector: women.

This is not an emotional argument – it is a commercial one. Diverse sales teams consistently outperform homogeneous ones. They make better decisions, build stronger customer relationships and deliver higher revenue. Despite this, women make up only around 20% of UK tech roles, a gap estimated to cost the UK economy up to £3.5bn annually in lost talent and productivity.

Common myths continue to hold progress back. Women do want sales careers, but like men, they want to feel supported, valued and given clear opportunities to progress. Flexibility and work-life balance are often wrongly framed as a lack of ambition, despite evidence showing women perform just as well as their male counterparts when given equal support.

"One proven way to address this imbalance is through structured apprenticeships"

Research shows that women leave sales roles not because of a lack of ability, but because of limited career development, sponsorship and visible pathways to leadership. Fewer female role models mean fewer women can see themselves thriving long-term in sales.

One proven way to address this imbalance is through structured apprenticeships. Sales apprenticeships demystify the profession, provide clear progression routes and embed mentoring from the outset. They also open the door to sales careers for young women who may never have considered the profession an option. At iSales Academy, apprenticeships have helped women progress from entry-

level roles into account management and leadership positions, supported by training, mentorship and inclusive workplace cultures. While gender-neutral job titles help, real change comes from engaging young women early and presenting sales as a credible, professional and rewarding career.

National Apprenticeship Week is the ideal moment for businesses to commit to improving gender balance in their sales teams. Increasing female representation is not just the right thing to do – it is a strategic investment in performance, culture and long-term growth.



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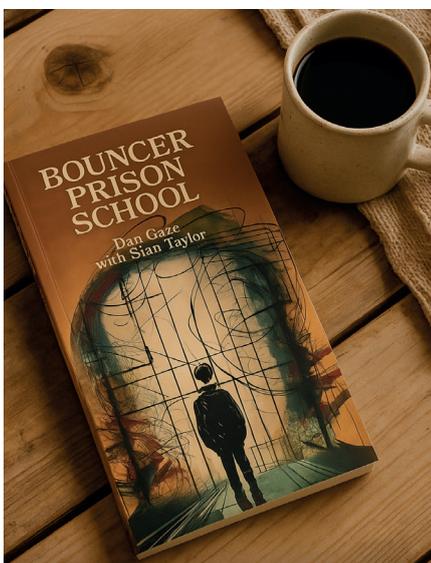


Working with young people to make a difference

Dan Gaze Support Service Ltd is a youth-centred mentoring and support company, driven by lived experience, compassion, and a bold belief in second chances. Dan Gaze Support Service offers 1-to-1 mentoring, behavioural coaching, and bespoke outreach to vulnerable young people, with a clear purpose that the young person's needs come first. Our team works in partnership with



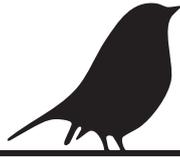
of the law, and even time in high-security prison. Rather than letting those chapters define him, he has transformed them into a unique foundation for helping others. You can read more about this in his book, *Bouncer Prison School*. In a world where many young people struggle with unmet emotional needs and limited support, Dan Gaze Support Service stands out as a reminder that hope is most powerful when it's grounded in real understanding and real action.



schools, especially those supporting social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs and local authorities. We have an alternative provision, providing tailored support to each individual. We offer tutoring in functional skills, maths and English, PE, music, business and AQA Awards. We prioritise listening, relationship-building, and trust as core tools in helping young people find direction and motivation. Dan's early years were marked by significant challenges, like expulsions from school, periods on the wrong side

 **Dan Gaze Support Service**
WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE





Dan Gaze Support Service

WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL APPROVED

Who We Are

DGSS provides experienced staff to support young people to fulfil their potential, develop their skills, and be active and positive members of their community. Our key aims are to build direct relationships, be a positive and consistent role model, coach and mentor young people to develop their skills and teach self-regulation. At DGSS we have a wealth of experience in SEMH as tutors, teachers, senior leaders and HLTA's.

Services

- Sports Interventions Training
- Targeted Mentoring
- 1-2-1 Support Mentoring
- School Transition Support
- In School Mentoring
- Group Mentoring
- Alternative Provision
- Teaching Functional Skills, English and Maths

Our Staff

All staff are highly qualified and will have a minimum of the below:

- Enhanced DBS
- First Aid Trained
- Level 1 Safeguarding
- Trauma Informed
- Exploitation Trained

Awards

- Best Entrepreneurship - biz4Biz 2025
- Winner Of The Pride of Stevenage Award 2021
- Caring Awards
- Paul Pearce Disability Award 2013

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CELEBRATION MARKS START OF CONSTRUCTION AT OUTSTANDING ALTERNATIVE PROVISION IN LETCHWORTH

Children who are permanently excluded or at risk of exclusion from mainstream schools in North Hertfordshire are a step closer to having a new purpose-built teaching centre following a groundbreaking celebration to mark the start of construction. The ceremony, at North Herts Education Support Centre (NHESC), Briar Patch in Letchworth was hosted by Hitchin-based contractor Ashe Construction, and was attended by representatives of the Education Support Centre, Hertfordshire County Council, architect **Saunders Boston** and the project's consultants. Hertfordshire County Council is working in partnership with NHESC to provide a purpose-built replacement for its teaching

"It's exciting to see work starting on site to provide an inspiring, well-designed learning environment"

centre at Briar Patch Lane and appointed Ashe to design and build the new facility. Rated outstanding in all areas by Ofsted, NHESC provides an alternative education for excluded students, or students who are at risk of exclusion, with the aim

of supporting a return to permanent full-time education. NHESC currently operates across two sites, Briar Patch in Letchworth and Bancroft in Hitchin. The expansion at Briar Patch will increase capacity from 33 to 40 pupils, allowing NHESC to operate from one purpose-built centre.

The new building will provide seven new classrooms and additional rooms for practical activities such as construction, science and food technology. There will be spaces for IT, a common room, fitness suite, administrative areas, and dedicated support spaces.

Ashe's construction and technical director Daniel Armes explained: "It's exciting to see work starting on site



valued. It will be an environment they can be proud of and that opens opportunities for enrichment in a way that our old facilities just didn't provide."

"We didn't have sports facilities or the ability to have afterschool clubs for specialist coaches. We can now provide enrichment and opportunities for a healthy lifestyle.

"We run as a school, and an educational environment to succeed. This will be a family resource space for outside agencies to use and where the whole child can be supported. The new Centre will also accommodate the increasing number of

"We are committed to ensuring that every child and young person in Hertfordshire has the opportunity to thrive and receive the support they need to fulfil their potential"

to provide an inspiring, well-designed learning environment. We are currently in our groundworks phase which also includes preparation for a new grass games pitch.

"In March we will start erecting the building structure and in April we will start work on the brickwork. All windows and curtain walling will be double glazed and the south facing windows will have solar shading to prevent overheating.

"Once watertight in June, the mechanical and electrical works will start, and we'll be installing the floors and ceilings. Then we'll undertake the fit out and decorate the new building ready for students to move into their brand-new, purpose-built facilities in November."

The new building has been designed for energy efficiency with high levels of insulation, air source heat pumps, and LED lighting.

Dan Nearney, Executive Head at North Herts Education Support Centre, described the benefits the new building will provide. He said: "Both of the existing education

support centres were not fit for purpose.

"This new facility at Briar Patch is designed for our children and will have a transformational effect on them. It will improve their life chances and help them towards their next steps whether it be college, university, an apprenticeship or returning to mainstream school.

"Following our recent Outstanding Ofsted report, just imagine what we can do with the new building! We will be able to support at least 40 children and become a community resource for 5-16-year-olds. We'll be supporting the community better than ever before.

"Our new Centre will enable us to provide hot meals and sports facilities with an outdoor space for use in the summer. The first floor will accommodate Key Stage 3 and the ground floor will cater for Key Stage 4 - All designed for the curriculum, based on the young people's needs."

Shelley Hughes, Head of Centre at Briar Patch NHESC, added: "The new Centre will provide a learning environment that's a quality space, where the children feel

children in our area that need supporting."

Cllr Mark Watkin, Executive Member for Education, SEND and Inclusion, Hertfordshire County Council, said:

"We are committed to ensuring that every child and young person in Hertfordshire has the opportunity to thrive and receive the support they need to fulfil their potential. The expansion of NHESC is a vital step in that journey—providing high-quality, alternative provision in an environment designed to inspire and empower. This investment reflects our dedication to building a sustainable, inclusive and thriving Hertfordshire."

External works to improve the access road and traffic flow will take place during the summer holidays to avoid any disruption to the Centre's operations.

The scheme has been designed by Saunders Boston, with Pellings as project manager and Gleeds as cost consultant.

BCAL is the engineer and **One Creative Environments** is the mechanical and electrical consultant. Completion is scheduled for Autumn this year.



Hertfordshire: A Hub for Cutting-Edge Science and Technology



Leading the Way in Life Sciences, Aerospace, and Defence Innovations

Stevenage Shows Why Britain Must Invest in the Science

Britain likes to say it wants to be a science superpower. In one Hertfordshire town, that ambition is no longer a slogan — it is a functioning reality.

Stevenage, the first New Town built after the Second World War, has quietly become one of the UK's most important centres for advanced science, technology and manufacturing. It is best known as the UK's leading cluster for cell and gene therapy, hosting the largest concentration of advanced therapies outside the United States. But life sciences are not Stevenage's only strategic strength. Alongside its world-leading life science ecosystem, Stevenage is also home to major global advanced manufacturing and defence innovators including Airbus and MBDA. These organisations sit at the cutting edge of aerospace, space, defence and systems engineering — sectors that rely on the same deep scientific capability,

"Alongside its world-leading life science ecosystem, Stevenage is also home to major global advanced manufacturing and defence innovators including Airbus and MBDA"

highly skilled workforce and long-term patient capital as advanced therapies. This convergence matters. Innovation today increasingly happens at the

boundaries between disciplines: life sciences, advanced manufacturing, space technologies, robotics, digital systems and materials science. Stevenage is one of the few places in the UK where these capabilities already co-exist at scale. The town hosts the Cell and Gene Therapy Catapult, the Stevenage Bioscience Catalyst and a growing network of global pharmaceutical firms, scale-ups, manufacturers and research organisations. Together they form a rare, end-to-end ecosystem that takes ideas from laboratory bench to clinical reality — and increasingly, to large-scale manufacturing. That same ecosystem is now being reinforced by investment and commitment from the aerospace and defence sectors. On Thursday 29 January 2026, Airbus opened its new "Launchpad" in Stevenage — a dedicated support service for new and early-stage companies in the space and advanced engineering industries. Backed

by support from the UK Space Agency, the Launchpad is designed to accelerate innovation, supply-chain growth and commercialisation for emerging firms. This is not a symbolic gesture. It is a clear signal that global industrial leaders see Stevenage as a priority location for early-stage innovation, scale-up and long-term growth. It also underlines a wider truth: early-stage funding and patient capital are now as critical in advanced manufacturing and space technologies as they are in life sciences.

"Advanced life sciences, aerospace, space and defence manufacturing deliver high-value jobs, export-intensive growth and strategic national capability"

Stevenage has already attracted £3.2 billion of private-sector investment for regeneration. That capital did not arrive by accident. It followed skills, infrastructure, regulatory credibility and a proven ability to translate science into production. Investors have already judged Stevenage — and by extension the UK — to be one of the best places in the world to develop complex, high-value technologies. Yet the same risk applies across all these sectors. Breakthrough ideas often falter in the “valley of death” between technical

success and commercial scale. Facilities are expensive. Prototyping, certification and trials are complex. Workforce skills take years to build. Without targeted early-stage and scale-up funding, the UK risks exporting its intellectual property while importing the finished products. The prize for getting this right is substantial. Advanced life sciences, aerospace, space and defence manufacturing deliver high-value jobs, export-intensive growth and strategic national capability. Even when individual companies fail, the skills, knowledge and infrastructure remain, strengthening the wider economy.

Stevenage shows what happens when government, industry and investors align around long-term priorities. It is not a regional experiment. It is national infrastructure — for health, for security, for productivity and for future growth. The choice now is whether Britain builds on this foundation with sustained early-stage investment across life sciences, advanced manufacturing and space — or whether it allows global competitors to capture the value of innovations developed on British soil.

Government needs to understand that their past investments need further funding support today, to assist with concluding early-stage production investment to deliver the solutions and the international opportunities for the Country.

ADRIAN HAWKINS OBE

Chairman - biz4Biz

Chairman - Hertfordshire Futures Board

Chairman - Stevenage Development Board

Chairman - Hertfordshire Skills & Employment Board





MAKE YOUR BUSINESS IDEA A REALITY WITH A £1,000 GRANT

Budding entrepreneurs have the chance to get a head start in business by pitching for a grant of up to a £1,000 from Dacorum's Den. The Dacorum Borough Council initiative, based on the popular TV series Dragons' Den, is a grant giving initiative to help local small businesses develop and grow. Now in its 12th year, Dacorum's Den has awarded more than £114,000 to more than 88 Dacorum businesses and has created additional jobs within the borough. This funding comes from generous local businesses, including this year's sponsors: Beeches Group, West Herts College, Sureserve Compliance Central and Cardo Group. Winners will also receive free expert business coaching provided by local marketing agency, Bloom with BB and sales coach, Sales Geek, and free annual membership to Connect Dacorum Networking Group.

Dacorum's Den is aimed at individuals and businesses who:

- Employ fewer than 10 employees and have a turnover of less than £500,000
- Have a great business idea
- Are eager to grow their business in Dacorum.

"By getting involved, if shortlisted, you will benefit from coaching and you'll help Dacorum celebrate innovation"

Dacorum's Den is a fantastic opportunity for anyone with a business idea to get a helping hand into making it reality, or for existing small companies to grow and adapt their business models to unlock future potential.

Cllr Adrian England, our Portfolio Holder for Place, said: "We are delighted to invite entrepreneurs into the 2026 Den. This is a fantastic opportunity to test your business idea in a supported environment!

"By getting involved, if shortlisted, you will benefit from coaching and you'll help Dacorum celebrate innovation, and the Dragons (who are not too scary) will 'breathe fire' into your vision and plans." Applications are open until midday on Wednesday 25 March 2026. Shortlisted applicants will be invited to put their ideas before a panel of judges, led by Councillor England. The panel will evaluate their pitches to determine if a grant will be awarded.

For further details (including eligibility criteria) and to apply, please visit the Dacorum's Den web page or email business@dacorum.gov.uk



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Insight

Sustainable Biz

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2026

FS sector navigates a challenging year-end, but brighter 2026 expected

Business volumes in the financial services sector continued to fall at a rapid pace in the final quarter of 2025.

Additionally, profitability declined at a sharp rate over Q4. The falls in business volumes and profitability are likely to have contributed to a deterioration in firms' sentiment in the three months to December.

The quarterly CBI Financial Services survey, conducted between 20 November and 9 December 2025, also found that FS firms expect trading conditions to improve somewhat in Q1 2026, with volumes and profitability growth set to recover. Headcount is anticipated to decline slightly, after being flat in Q4. Investment intentions for the year ahead remain mixed. Firms plan to increase spending on IT while reducing capex in land & buildings and plant, vehicles & machinery.

Key findings:

- Business volumes continued to decline at a rapid pace in the quarter to December 2025 (weighted balance of -38% from -36% in September). However, firms expect that volumes growth will recover moderately over Q1 2026 (+18%).
- Sentiment amongst FS firms deteriorated in the three months to December, marking the sixth quarter in a row of falling and/or flat optimism (-20 from +3% in September).
- Average spreads were broadly flat in the quarter to December (-2% from -47% in September) but are set to decline at a

"Recent Budget decisions, including changes to stamp duty for newly listed companies and avoiding a new banking levy, were welcome steps"

strong rate over Q1 2026 (-30%).

- The value of non-performing loans remained broadly unchanged in the quarter to December (+1 from -1 in September) and is expected to stay flat next quarter (+1%).
- Profitability declined over Q4 2025 at a sharp rate (-53% from -13% in September). FS firms expect profitability to recover modestly over Q1 2026 (+6%).
- Headcount was broadly unchanged over the quarter to December (-1% from -24% in September) but is set to decline slightly over the next three months (-8%).
- FS firms expect to increase investment in IT over the next twelve months (compared to the previous twelve), to the greatest extent since September 2023. Capital expenditures on land & buildings and vehicles, plant & machinery are expected to decline to a slightly greater extent than the previous quarter.

- Inadequate net return was the most commonly cited factor expected to limit investment over the year ahead (45% from 42% in September; long-run average of 51%).
- There was a notable reduction in the share of firms citing uncertainty about demand, dropping from a 13-year high in the previous quarter to below its long-run average (38% from 69% in September; long-run average of 48%).
- Just over a quarter of firms cited 'other' factors as likely to limit investment (27% from 26% in September; long-run average of 8%), with comments continuing to point to challenges arising from taxation and regulation.

Louise Hellem, CBI Chief Economist, said: "Financial services firms reported a gloomy end to 2025, with sentiment deteriorating amid persistent falls in business volumes and profits. But there are early signs of stabilisation heading into 2026, with firms expecting a moderate recovery in volumes in Q1 and a renewed focus on investment in digital and IT capabilities to support productivity, resilience, and long-term transformation. "Recent Budget decisions, including changes to stamp duty for newly listed companies and avoiding a new banking levy, were welcome steps. To turn cautious optimism into sustained growth, the government must now focus on delivery and double down on the Financial Services Growth and Competitiveness Strategy to unlock investment, drive innovation, and reinforce the UK's global edge."

GROWING DEMAND BUT GENERAL PROPERTY MARKET SLOWDOWN AHEAD

Recent property news for Hertfordshire indicates a general market slowdown reflecting national trends, but with strong underlying demand and only a modest average price decline.

Key points from recent news and data for Hertfordshire show:

- **Price Trends:** The average property price in Hertfordshire is approximately £529k, which saw a modest decline of around 2% (£8.8k) over the last twelve months (as of late 2025 data).
- **National Context:** This local trend is part of a wider UK market where house prices are generally being kept in check

"The average property price in Hertfordshire is approximately £529k"

by affordability constraints, though a stronger start to 2026 is expected after the Autumn Budget provided more certainty.

- **Market Activity:** The market experienced a temporary pause ahead of the November 2025 Budget, with buyers and

sellers adopting a cautious approach rather than exiting the market entirely.

- **Long-term Growth:** Despite short-term fluctuations, many homes in southern England, including Hertfordshire, have seen substantial value increases over the last five years, with some jumping by £100,000 or more since October 2020.
- Major property portals such as Zoopla have advised sellers to price their homes correctly to achieve a timely sale, as overpriced properties tend to linger on the market.
- **Rental Market:** Nationally, rental growth has slowed as supply rises and demand drops to a six-year low, a potential positive for renters in the area.



ALMOST A MILLION YOUNG PEOPLE TO BENEFIT FROM EXPANDED SUPPORT, NEW TRAINING, AND WORK EXPERIENCE OPPORTUNITIES

Almost one million young people will benefit from learning or employment opportunities as a result of a major £820 million funding package.

Thanks to the funding, 350,000 new training or workplace opportunities, including in Herts, in sectors including construction, health and social care and hospitality will be provided to young people on Universal Credit to help them develop on the job skills, employer networks, and CV and interview coaching – breaking down barriers to employment and ensuring every young person has the chance to reach their potential.

In total, 900,000 young people on Universal Credit and looking for work will also benefit from a dedicated work support session, followed by four additional weeks of intensive support.

They will be referred to one of up to six pathways by their work coach: work, work experience, apprenticeship, wider training, learning or a workplace training programme with a guaranteed interview, designed in partnership with employers. The investment will provide a springboard to a better future for close to a million young people, giving them the chance to gain crucial skills and support to find a job with long term prospects.

As part of this training, young people will receive six weeks of training, work experience, and a guaranteed job interview, giving young people their first foot in the door towards meaningful employment, boosting their prospects and supporting a stronger economy as part of our Plan for Change.

55,000 young people also stand to gain from a government-backed guaranteed job, which will begin roll-out from Spring 2026 in areas with some of the highest need in Great Britain.

THESE REGIONS ARE:

- **Birmingham & Solihull**
- **East Midlands**
- **Greater Manchester**
- **Hertfordshire & Essex**
- **Central & East Scotland**
- **Southwest & Southeast Wales**

More than 1,000 young people are expected to start a job in the first six months alone, with local partners and employers to play a key role in supporting young people as they transition into meaningful employment with fully funded wages and wraparound support for young people.





Alongside this, Youth Hubs – centres where young people can receive vital help to get them back on track – will be expanded to every local area of Great Britain, bringing the total to over 360. This will ensure young people up and down the country can access the life-changing support Youth Hubs offer, such as CV advice, skills training, mental health support, housing advice, and careers guidance.

There is an expectation that young people will take up the opportunities they are offered, and sanctions to benefits could be applied for those who don't engage with the offered support without good reason. Work and Pensions Secretary Pat McFadden, said: "Every young person deserves a fair chance to succeed. When given the right support and opportunities, they will grasp them.

"That's why we are introducing a range of reforms to help young people take that vital step into the workplace or training and to go on and make something of their lives.

"This funding is a downpayment on young people's futures and the future of the country, creating real pathways into good jobs and

providing work experience, skills training and guaranteed employment.

Recent data shows that almost one million young people are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), a 26% increase from pre-pandemic levels.

Today's announcement represents a major intervention to reverse this trend and ensure no young person is left behind.

It builds on a wide range of measures the Government is bringing forward to support young people, including expanded funding for youth trailblazers, and a major investigation spearheaded by Alan Milburn into the barriers preventing the young from accessing work.

Earlier intervention is being prioritised, with a £34 million investment to make it easier to identify young people who need support before they drop out of the system. This includes a new Risk of NEET indicator tool, giving local areas more accurate insights to target support where it's needed most.

The Government will also invest in further education attendance monitoring and provide targeted support for young people in state-funded alternative provision schools, helping them secure valuable work experience.

To ensure young people transition effectively from school into post-16 education or training, we are working with schools and piloting automatic enrolment with further education providers for young people without a place.

As announced by the Chancellor, the Government has committed to delivering a Jobs Guarantee for 18 to 21-year-olds who have been searching for work whilst in receipt of Universal Credit for 18 months. The initiative will provide 25 hours/week of fully subsidised six-month paid work to every eligible 18- to 21-year-old who has been on Universal Credit and looking for work for 18 months. The young people

will be paid at the relevant minimum wage and also receive fully funded wrap around support.

The Government is finalising its National Youth Strategy, shaped by insights from over 14,000 young people, that will set out a long-term vision for youth

policy across government.

Tracey Collins, Director of Emerging Talent and Social Impact at Kier, said: "At Kier, we are committed to providing opportunities for young people and bring emerging talent into construction through hundreds of work experience and apprenticeship positions every year. It's important that these opportunities are open to everyone, regardless of background or history, as every young person deserves the chance to flourish. To support this, we are delivering a number of initiatives to make Kier accessible to underrepresented groups including a pilot project with the Youth Futures Foundation as well as through our Kierriculum schools' engagement programme.

"We believe that the Youth Guarantee will further strengthen this activity and we are proud to support the government's work to collectively reduce long-term youth unemployment and help them reach a better future."

"It's important that these opportunities are open to everyone, regardless of background or history"



OAKLANDS
TRAINING
& DEVELOPMENT

APPRENTICESHIP & WORKFORCE SKILLS SUMMIT

WHEN

Tuesday 10th February,
1.00pm - 4.30 pm

WHERE

Oaklands College,
Welwyn Garden City
Campus

RSVP



FUTURE-FOCUSED SUMMIT

For employers exploring apprenticeships, skills training, and workforce development in National Apprenticeship Week.

Following the success of last year's Employer Training & Skills Summit, Oaklands Training & Development is proud to host the 2026 Apprenticeship & Workforce Skills Summit.

This year's summit will focus on Apprenticeships, alongside the wider adult skills, training, and workforce development routes offered by Oaklands Training & Development. The event forms a key part of our National Apprenticeship Week activity.

As part of the summit, we will be offering two advance-bookable breakout sessions:

BREAKOUT SESSION 1: Apprenticeships Update

A deep dive into the latest developments in apprenticeships, including Foundation Apprenticeships, policy changes, and emerging opportunities for employers.

BREAKOUT SESSION 2: Adult Skills & Training Pathways

An overview of adult learning routes, including Skills Bootcamps, Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs), and other upskilling options to help you grow and retain talent.



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The world of work is evolving at pace, and the skills employers need are changing just as quickly.

To stay ahead, organisations must embrace new technologies, invest in upskilling, and adopt flexible workforce development pathways.

Oaklands Training & Development invites you to our 2026 Apprenticeship & Workforce Skills Summit, held during National Apprenticeship Week. This free event is designed to support employers with practical insights, forward looking discussions, and the tools needed to build a future-ready workforce.

As part of the summit, we will be offering two advance-bookable breakout sessions:

Apprenticeships Update: A deep dive into the latest developments in apprenticeships, including Foundation Apprenticeships, policy updates, and emerging opportunities for employers.

Adult Skills & Training Pathways: An overview of adult learning routes, including Skills Bootcamps, Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs), and other upskilling options to help you grow and retain talent.

WHY ATTEND?

- **Explore the Power of Apprenticeships & Skills Training**

Discover how apprenticeships, skills bootcamps, and industry-led training can strengthen your talent pipeline and support long-term growth

- **Understand Workforce Trends**

Gain clear insights into changing skills demands, emerging technologies, and how businesses can adapt through strategic training

- **Join Practical Roundtable Discussions**

Engage in focused, interactive sessions covering apprenticeships, workplace

skills, HTQs, funding routes, and more

- **Connect with Employers & Training Specialists**

Network with peers, education leaders and industry partners to share best practice and explore collaborative opportunities

This summit is your opportunity to explore new training solutions, enhance staff development strategies, and maximise government funding opportunities

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RETAILERS REPORT BLEAK HOLIDAY TRADING AS SALES OUTLOOK DARKENS

Retail sales volumes fell at an accelerated rate in the year to December, extending a period of weakness that began in mid-2023 – according to the latest Distributive Trades Survey.

The new year is expected to start on a gloomy note for the retail sector. Retailers anticipate that annual sales will fall sharply next month, with expectations at their weakest since March 2021.

Key findings included:

- Retail sales volumes fell at an accelerated rate in the year to December (weighted balance of -44% from -32% in November), with the downturn expected to deepen in January (-57%).
- Sales for the time of year were judged to be “poor” in December, to a greater extent than last month (-31% from -20% in November). Next month’s sales are set to similarly disappoint against seasonal norms (-34%).
- Online retail sales volumes declined at a moderate rate in the year to December, following two consecutive months of growth (-12% from +13% in November). Sales are expected to contract at a steep pace next month (-42%).
- Wholesale sales volumes fell in the year to December at the fastest rate since June 2020 (-50% from -31% in November). Wholesalers expect sales to decline at the same pace next month (-50%).

"The gloomy retail outlook was mirrored across the wholesale and motor trades sectors, which also expect sales to continue falling in January"

- Total distribution sales volumes (including retail, wholesale, and motor trades) fell in the year to December at the fastest rate since June 2020 (-46% from -35% in November). Firms anticipate that the pace of decline will quicken next month (-53%).

In addition, data from the survey showed:

- Retail orders placed upon suppliers declined at a fast pace in the year to December (-42% from -25% in November). Retailers expect to cut back on order volumes at a faster rate in January (-59%), marking the weakest expectations since March 2021.
- Retail stock volumes were judged to be “too high” relative to expected

sales in December, reaching their highest balance since May 2020 (+35% from +18% in November; long-run average of +17%). Stock positions are expected to soften markedly next month (+12%).

- Motor trade sales volumes contracted at strong pace in the year to December, though the decline was slower than in the previous month (-39% from -55% in November). Sales are expected to fall at a faster rate in December (-49%).

Martin Sartorius, Principal Economist, CBI, said: “Retailers reported that annual sales volumes fell rapidly in December, as weak consumer confidence contributed to softer trading conditions in the lead-up to Christmas. Firms do not anticipate any relief in the new year, with sales expectations deteriorating to their weakest in over four years. The gloomy retail outlook was mirrored across the wholesale and motor trades sectors, which also expect sales to continue falling in January. “Against a backdrop of weak trading conditions, there is a clear need for government action to lower the cost of doing business. Progressing reforms to the business rates system, lowering crippling energy costs, and finding balanced solutions to the Employment Rights Bill through secondary legislation would help restore confidence and unlock vital investment.”

Herts entrepreneur recognised in business campaign



Emily Vass, founder of Herts based digital accountancy firm Nourished, has been recognised in Small Business Britain's f:Entrepreneur #IAIso100 campaign.

The initiative celebrates female founders making a difference through innovation, business growth and community impact. Emily, from Hatfield, runs a modern, digital accountancy practice that helps small business owners and online creatives feel confident and in control of their finances. She launched her cloud-based practice in 2024 and blends expert knowledge with a fresh, relatable approach to money, reaching thousands on social media through free financial education.

After leaving the corporate world, Emily built her practice around the values of flexibility, balance, and empowering entrepreneurs to grow businesses that truly support their lives.

Emily said: "I didn't always see myself

"I didn't always see myself represented among entrepreneurs, so to be recognised alongside so many inspiring women is incredibly meaningful"

represented among entrepreneurs, so to be recognised alongside so many inspiring women is incredibly meaningful.

"I'm proud to show that accountancy doesn't have to be stuffy or intimidating – it can be modern, approachable and

genuinely supportive of the lives people want to build."

Her inclusion highlights her efforts in creating a forward-thinking accountancy business and her dedication to making financial education more accessible for small business owners.

Michelle Ovens CBE, founder and CEO of Small Business Britain, said: "It is brilliant to feature Emily in this year's #IAIso100 campaign.

"All of the female entrepreneurs in this year's line-up are inspirational and remarkable role models. Their creativity, leadership and community impact show exactly why supporting female founders is so important – not only for the UK's economic growth but for the positive difference they make to wider society." The #IAIso100 campaign, launched in 2017, promotes the stories of exceptional female entrepreneurs and provides training, events and networking support.

AIRBUS LAUNCHPAD TO BOOST UK SPACE SMES WITH £3.9 MILLION GOVERNMENT BACKING

A new facility designed to help small businesses thrive in the UK space sector has opened at Airbus Defence and Space's Stevenage site, strengthening Hertfordshire's position as a key contributor to the UK's rapidly growing space economy.

Backed by £3.9 million from the UK Space Agency, the Airbus Launchpad will provide SMEs, start-ups and research organisations with access to laboratories, workspaces and testing facilities through a no-cost residency programme. The facility can accommodate over 50 people and aims to strengthen the UK space supply chain while developing homegrown skills and capabilities.

The UK Space Agency funding comes from the Space Clusters Infrastructure Fund and was match-funded by Airbus. Three companies – Applied Atomics, Spintex and Stars Edge – will take up residence from early February.

Space Minister Liz Lloyd said: "By backing our SMEs and start-ups, we're helping brilliant British ideas become successful businesses that create jobs and strengthen our supply chain. This

"By backing our SMEs and start-ups, we're helping brilliant British ideas become successful businesses that create jobs and strengthen our supply chain"

partnership between Airbus and the UK Space Agency shows what we can achieve when industry and government work together to build a space sector where the smallest of businesses can thrive."

Dr Paul Bate, CEO of the UK Space Agency, said: "The Airbus Launchpad is another important example of how collaboration between industry leaders and innovative SMEs can strengthen our space sector. By giving start-ups and smaller businesses direct access to world-class facilities and expertise, we're helping turn brilliant ideas into the products and services of tomorrow. Our £3.9 million investment through the Space Clusters Infrastructure Fund will help develop homegrown skills, diversify the supply chain, and create new space capabilities for the UK."

The Airbus Launchpad forms part of Airbus' Community for Space Prosperity programme, which aims to grow UK space supply chain activity through research, innovation and outreach.



Kata Escott, Managing Director Airbus Defence and Space UK, said: "Successful SMEs are essential for the future of the UK space sector and I'm proud that we are able to use our position as the UK's largest space company to lean in and support their development. This initiative is about creating the conditions for collaboration, innovation and growth. By connecting with SMEs and innovators, and in partnership with the Government, we are accelerating progress for the UK at a time when it has never mattered more."

"This initiative is about creating the conditions for collaboration, innovation and growth"

The Airbus Launchpad is the latest facility to open with support from the UK Space Agency's Space Clusters Infrastructure Fund, which is helping to build world-class facilities for the UK space sector.

STRENGTHENING THE SPACE EAST CLUSTER

This investment not only boosts Hertfordshire's position within the sector but also enhances the broader Space East cluster's capacity to attract talent, support business creation, and build future-ready space capabilities. As a key partner within the Space East cluster, Hertfordshire Futures continues to champion regional collaboration and ensure Hertfordshire plays a central role in shaping the East of England's space economy.

The Airbus Launchpad joins a growing network of facilities funded through the UK Space Agency's Space Clusters Infrastructure Fund, all aimed at building world-class space infrastructure that benefits regions across the UK – including Hertfordshire.



South West Hertfordshire boosts engagement with digital tools

Five councils in South West Hertfordshire carried out a pilot to test digital tools and targeted social media polling to support engagement on their joint strategic plan.

- **Outcome:** The programme generated high levels of participation, with thousands of votes and comments helping the councils understand local priorities for the area's long-term future.
- **Scale and approach:** Delivered by a multi-disciplinary team across five district councils, supported by Hertfordshire County Council, suppliers and communications specialists.
- **Technology used:** Built-ID's Give My View for social media polling, Bang the Table (Engagement HQ) for the main consultation, along with videos, graphics, QR-coded materials and an interactive consultation document.

Councils involved: Dacorum Borough Council, Hertsmere Borough Council, St Albans City and District Council, Three Rivers District Council and Watford Borough Council, supported by Hertfordshire County Council. This was a PropTech Innovation Fund pilot and describes what was tested at the time.

THE PLANNING CHALLENGE

The South West Hertfordshire authorities are preparing a joint strategic plan for a large and diverse area covering five districts. Long-term strategic planning is often difficult for residents to engage with, particularly younger people and those in rural or under-represented groups.

The councils wanted to:

- raise awareness of the joint strategic plan
- reach younger people, especially those aged 18 to 25
- present high-level planning information in a simple and engaging way
- run a wider and more inclusive consultation than would have been possible using traditional methods
- understand community priorities across five districts

Traditional consultation methods relied heavily on long documents, paper materials and in-person events. The councils wanted to test how digital tools could extend reach and make engagement easier.

WHAT THEY DID

The councils designed a digital consultation programme supported by planners, communications officers, digital teams and suppliers. They:

- ran a targeted social media "quick-fire" poll using Give My View, tested first with a youth forum
- created an interactive consultation document on Engagement HQ, with embedded survey questions, visuals and infographics
- produced short explainer videos and graphics with Penknife to explain planning terms and promote key messages
- promoted the consultation through newsletters, parish councils, social media and press coverage
- distributed QR-coded business cards and posters in schools, libraries, leisure centres and train stations
- targeted digital advertising at younger people to increase participation
- worked with Icen Projects to design and analyse the poll

- established a youth forum to help shape the direction of questions and ensure content was clear and engaging

The pilot used a multi-channel approach so residents could respond quickly through the poll or explore more detailed material in the full consultation.

The "Give My View" poll asked residents simple, high-level questions in plain language. Image courtesy of South West Hertfordshire councils.

Short videos explained the consultation in plain language and were shared on social media.

RESULTS AND IMPACT

The programme achieved high levels of participation and generated detailed feedback across the five districts. The councils found that:

- 3,122 people took part in the poll, casting 24,734 votes
- participants submitted over 5,000 pieces of free-text feedback, offering detailed views on priorities for the area
- digital adverts reached over 229,000 people across the partnership area
- older residents were more likely to take part than in the 2020 consultation, while engagement from younger people improved through the youth forum

- and targeted advertising
- sustainable infrastructure and natural and green living were the most popular long-term priorities
- simple, high-level poll questions encouraged broader participation than the longer survey

Comparison with previous engagement

The councils compared the results with their earlier 'SW Herts – Your Future' engagement in 2020. Although the 2022 poll was longer, covered more complex planning issues, and ran for half the time, it achieved stronger overall engagement:

- total visits increased from 10,647 in 2020 to 15,944 in 2022
- participants answered 24,734 questions, compared with 15,042 in 2020
- residents left 5,198 comments, more than double the 2,082 comments in 2020
- the number of voters remained broadly similar (3,291 in 2020 and 3,122 in 2022), despite the shorter campaign and a pause in marketing during the national period of mourning

These improvements suggest the digital approach helped broaden reach and generate richer feedback, even though overall voter numbers remained similar.

WHAT THEY LEARNED

The councils found that:

- digital tools can significantly extend reach, but still require targeted marketing to engage younger residents
- plain language and clear visuals are essential

to maintain interest in long-term strategic planning

- combining digital tools with traditional methods helps reach groups who prefer in-person engagement
- a multidisciplinary team — including planners, communications specialists, IT and designers — is essential for running an effective consultation
- having different questions on the poll and the survey made later reporting more complex
- quick-fire polls work best at early stages of plan-making
- engagement with younger residents needs to be ongoing, with clear feedback loops to show how their input shapes decisions
- headline response numbers can mask variations across districts, which need to be monitored during the campaign

FUTURE PLANS

Hertfordshire County Council, working with the district and borough councils,

will use the results to support work on the new Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) for Hertfordshire. Legislative changes mean the SDS will replace the South West Hertfordshire Joint Strategic Plan.

The councils will use what they learned from this work to refine how they use digital tools and improve how feedback from different channels is combined and reported. They also plan to make sure future consultations continue to use clear language and accessible content.



PROPOSED UNIVERSAL THEME PARK AND RESORT GRANTED PLANNING PERMISSION

Bedford looks set to become home to the first Universal-branded theme park and resort in the United Kingdom and Europe after another major planning hurdle was cleared.

Universal's theme park and resort, will be a major boost to the tourism and creative industries as well as the UK economy overall, with an estimated £50bn of direct and indirect economic benefit.

News that the theme park and resort has been granted planning permission means Universal is poised to become one of the region's largest employers, creating 20,000 construction jobs and 8,000 permanent positions once operational, with approximately 80% of all jobs going to local workers.

The project will help deliver key transportation upgrades, including an expanded Wixams railway station and new direct slip roads from the A421.

Page Thompson President of New Ventures, Universal Destinations &

"In the months ahead, we are committed to sharing progress as well as what to expect"

Experiences said: "I can share an important update on our plans to bring a new entertainment resort complex featuring a world-class theme park to Bedford. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has approved our request for planning permission to be granted by way of making a Special Development Order (SDO) and I would like to extend my thanks to them.

"While there are still further steps

to complete, including a statutory parliamentary review period, this decision represents another important milestone for the project.

"On behalf of the company, I want to express my sincere appreciation for the continued engagement from Bedford and the various communities surrounding our site, as well as the many other national and local stakeholders who have provided feedback and expressed such enthusiasm on the transformative nature of our project.

"In the months ahead, we are committed to sharing progress as well as what to expect including job opportunities and how local businesses and suppliers can potentially work with us. The interest and support we've already seen from both local companies and residents has been incredibly encouraging.

"In the meantime, please do continue to visit universalukproject.co.uk for relevant updates."

UNIVERSAL DESTINATIONS & EXPERIENCES FIRST THEME PARK AND RESORT ENTERTAINMENT COMPLEX IN EUROPE

Who we are

Proud members of the Comcast NBCUniversal Family Universal Destinations & Experiences is part of Comcast Corporation, a global media and technology company that also includes NBCUniversal and Sky in the UK.

Universal Destinations & Experiences

Universal Destinations & Experiences offers guests around the world the most innovative, immersive and popular entertainment experiences.

We have five Universal-branded theme parks and resorts around the world, with new developments including Universal Horror Unleashed Las Vegas recently opened in August 2025, and Universal Kids Resort (Frisco, Texas) set to open in 2026.



Our project delivers significant benefits for the UK and local communities



What we've done so far

December 2023

Confirmed purchase of a nearly 500-acre parcel of land in Bedford, exploring a potential new theme park and resort experience at this site.

2024

Feasibility and due diligence work, including discussions with local and national stakeholders.

Spring 2024

Public engagement to share our proposal with local communities.

- Nearly **1,500** people attended in-person events.
- Nearly **100** local organisations engaged.
- 6,000+** survey responses received, with over **92% expressing support for the project.**

April 2025

Comcast NBCUniversal announces intent to build first Universal-branded theme park and resort in Europe, located in Bedford in the United Kingdom.

December 2025

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) approves our request for planning permission to be granted by way of making a Special Development Order (SDO).



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WILLMOTT DIXON SECURES £136M FLAGSHIP REGENERATION SCHEME IN LUTON TOWN CENTRE

Willmott Dixon has been appointed to deliver The Stage, a landmark £136 million mixed-use regeneration project that will transform the heart of Luton town centre. Secured via the Southern Construction Framework (SCF), this flagship development forms a central part of the Luton Town Centre Masterplan and is supported by £20 million from the Government's Local Regeneration Fund (formerly the Levelling Up Fund). The project underlines Willmott Dixon's track record in delivering high-profile urban regeneration schemes that combine residential, commercial, and public realm transformation.

Situated on the former Bute Street Shoppers car park, The Stage will create a vibrant mixed-use destination featuring 292 high-quality apartments, including 84 affordable rental homes. The development will also deliver commercial units to stimulate local economic activity, a multi-purpose venue with curated food and beverage offerings, and a new public garden square that enhances community connectivity and green space in the town centre.

Sustainability and long-term impact are central to the project's design, featuring energy-efficient building systems with enhanced insulation and photovoltaic (PV) panels for on-site renewable energy generation. The development will also include landscaped environments designed with Sustainable Urban Drainage

"We're at an exciting point in regenerating the town centre. This project will help transform the area into a vibrant space we can all be proud of"

Systems (SuDS) and biodiverse green infrastructure.

The project represents a significant milestone for Luton's regeneration ambitions, strategically positioned near the rail station, bus interchange, and taxi rank – making it one of the most accessible areas to live, work and visit in the town.

Stewart Brundell, chief operating officer at Willmott Dixon's construction business: "We are proud to be delivering this transformational project for Luton. The Stage represents exactly the type of comprehensive urban regeneration that can revitalise town centres and create lasting positive impact for communities. This development will provide high-quality homes, stimulate local economic activity, and create enhanced public spaces that will benefit residents, workers, and visitors for generations to come.

Being appointed to deliver this flagship scheme reinforces our position as a leading contractor in complex town centre regeneration projects that require the integration of residential, commercial, and public realm elements."

Cllr James Taylor, portfolio holder for Regeneration and Inclusive Growth at Luton Council, added:

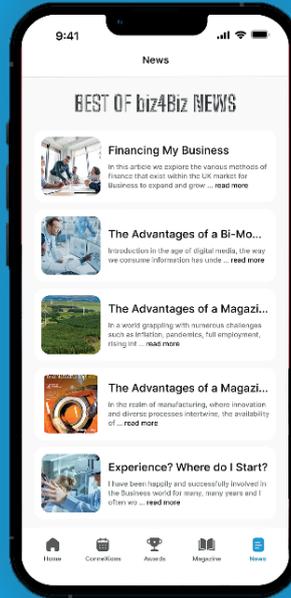
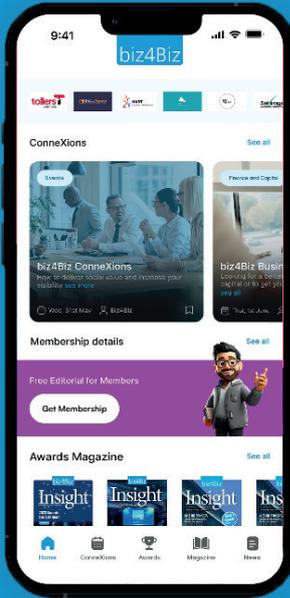
"We're at an exciting point in regenerating the town centre. This project will help transform the area into a vibrant space we can all be proud of. This is a crucial element of the Town Centre Masterplan and supports our mission to eradicate poverty in Luton. Improving this gateway to the town will help create a more positive first impression, making it more welcoming for visitors, workers, and families, with enhanced public spaces, air quality, and connectivity."

The appointment builds on Willmott Dixon's established track record in delivering complex town centre regeneration projects. Recent successes include the £48.8m Queen Mary University School of Business and Management redevelopment, the £30m Barnes Hospital regeneration programme, and the transformational Spindles Town Square redevelopment in Oldham - a 450,000 square foot mixed-use development featuring a new market, flexible offices, event space and heritage archive. Willmott Dixon is working alongside partners Rider Levett Bucknall and WSP to deliver the project.

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The app offers a number of exciting features with networking at its heart, allowing you to build meaningful connections with like-minded individuals and businesses within our vibrant community. We are also renowned for our variety of curated magazines which each offer a unique perspective on topics ranging from business to lifestyle. You can use the app to explore Insight, Sustainable Biz and Manufacturing Biz and see these stories and this rich multi-media experience come to life. The app also moves you closer to a wide range of biz4Biz events and not only offers seamless registration but allows you to manage your attendance and access full event details from one centralised platform. While making sure you never miss any of our must-attend events, the app also ensures that you completely maximise all of our exclusive membership packages and fully benefit from all of our enhanced features. Finally, as you would expect from a cutting edge organisation, we also keep you informed instantly, allowing you to access the latest news and breaking stories in the region and around the world.



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In an era characterised by seismic shifts in the global economic landscape, a remarkable phenomenon is unfolding, one that heralds the largest generational wealth transfer in history. As the sun sets on the careers of the baby-boomer generation, a new dawn beckons for the young, ambitious and visionary. At the heart of this transition lies the vibrant domain of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), where opportunity knocks louder than ever before.

A HISTORIC TRANSFER AWAITS

Picture this: over 75,000 companies in the UK alone, each a testament to the entrepreneurial spirit, boasting revenues north of £1,000,000. Their architects? A generation of business

"This burgeoning wave of entrepreneurs sees not just companies, but legacies ready for a new chapter"

owners now on the cusp of retirement. But this isn't a narrative confined to the British Isles. From the fjords of the Nordics to the vibrant markets of the USA, and the bustling economic landscapes of Germany and Australia, this trend paints a global

canvas. The baton is poised for passing, but the question looms – who will take the helm?

AN UNPREPARED LEGACY

A startling revelation by Wilmington Trust sheds light on a critical gap – almost 60% of these privately-owned bastions of industry lack a clear succession plan. The foundation of their life's work, their companies, remain without a formal valuation, an oversight that could lead to untold losses in potential and opportunity.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP THROUGH ACQUISITION: A NEW PARADIGM

Enter the bold and the brave, fuelled by the pioneering ethos of "Entrepreneurship Through Acquisition," a movement birthed in the hallowed halls of Harvard

Business School. This burgeoning wave of entrepreneurs sees not just companies, but legacies ready for a new chapter. They recognize the inherent value in established enterprises, where profitability, not just potential, shapes valuation. It's a shift from the ground-up approach, moving away from the venture capital frenzy to a more measured, value-driven investment in proven entities.

THE MISMATCHED MARKETPLACE

Yet, the journey is fraught with hurdles. According to insights from BizBuySell, a staggering 80% of businesses listed for sale find no buyer, a testament to the chasm between seller expectations and market realities. Often, inflated valuations, spurred by overzealous brokers, derail potential deals, leaving businesses in limbo.

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Company Name	Revenue	Employees	Location	Website	Contact Info
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DEF Corp	\$5M - \$10M	50-100	USA	www.def.com	Jane Smith, CFO
GHI LLC	\$10M - \$50M	100-500	USA	www.ghi.com	Mike Johnson, CEO





Private sector activity rounds off a tough year – CBI Growth Indicator

Firms across the private sector once again expect activity to fall in the next three months (weighted balance of -30%). This extends a run of negative predictions that began in late 2024.

The downturn is expected to be broad-based, with business volumes in the services sector set to decline (-29%), driven by weak expectations in both business & professional services (-24%) and consumer services (-46%).

Expectations for distribution sales deteriorated significantly, to their weakest since June 2020 (-47%).

In contrast, while manufacturers predict another modest fall in output (-17%), expectations were less negative than last month, moving roughly back to where they were in October.

The disappointing outlook comes as private sector activity fell again in the three months to December (-34%, broadly unchanged from -35% in the three months to November).

All sub-sectors reported falling activity according to the CBI's Growth Indicator..

A balance is the weighted percentage of companies reporting an increase minus those reporting a decrease.

Key findings from our monthly Services

"Business cannot face another year of stasis and will be looking for the government to expedite delivery in 2026"

Sector Survey showed:

- Business volumes in the services sector fell in the three months to December (-40%), at a broadly similar pace as in the three months to November.
- Both business & professional services (-34%) and consumer services (-40%) volumes fell heavily through the quarter.
- Hiring intentions within the services sector remain weak (-34%), now at their lowest since July 2020. Business & professional services companies expect headcount to fall over the next three months (-24%), while consumer services firms expect a sharp fall in numbers employed (-51%)
- Selling price inflation expectations in the services sector accelerated in December (+15%, from +7% in November). This

reflects a pick up in expectations for both business & professional services firms (+12%) and consumer services (+26%).

Alpesh Paleja, CBI Deputy Chief Economist, said: "Our latest surveys round off a disappointing year for private sector growth. They mark a continuation of the headwinds that have plagued businesses over the past 12 months: tepid demand conditions, with households cautious around spending; and strong cost pressures squeezing margins.

"Uncertainty ahead of November's Budget also put the brakes on key spending decisions and big projects, choking up pipelines of work. The latest Growth Indicator suggests that the alleviation of this uncertainty hasn't materially boosted activity.

"Business cannot face another year of stasis and will be looking for the government to expedite delivery in 2026. The effective model of compromise and partnership achieved on the Employment Rights Bill demonstrates what can be achieved through meaningful collaboration. The government must now further leverage private sector expertise to broaden industrial energy cost support and simplify the tax system in pursuit of its growth mission."



Meteor Communications has been included in the 2026 edition of The Sunday Times 100 Tech

Meteor Communications has been included in the 2026 edition of The Sunday Times 100 Tech, Britain's fastest-growing private technology companies. The St Albans based company provide innovative Environmental monitoring solutions, implementing real time monitoring systems for critical assets across Water Utilities, Rail and Government in the UK and Europe. Real time environmental data for parameters such as Water Quality, flow and weather along with images are collected using Meteor's proprietary ESNET and MRC hardware platforms, with data sent in real time to the MeteorCloud® web platform. ESNET Water Quality monitoring systems are in use by most UK Water Utilities for applications including compliance

"Meteor are expanding internationally, with systems already in service in Canada, Germany and Switzerland"

to Section 82. Over 3,600 Meteor MRC cameras are currently in service across Water Utilities, Government and Rail sectors. The UK Environment Agency utilise over 1,900 Meteor cameras for critical flood defence structures. Launched in 2005, MeteorCloud® is

a global platform and data hub for Environmental data. It is continuously developing in functionality and scale, with over 500 million data points and 25 million images processed during 2025. In addition to offering real time display the platform has comprehensive data dissemination, visualisation, alarm handling and AI analysis tools. Meteor offer Water Quality as A Service (WQaAS), a concept unique to the industry on inception and now widely adopted, to deliver robust, reliable water quality data. This encompasses provision of complete monitoring packages including sensors, field service and calibration at Meteor's own laboratories. Meteor are expanding internationally, with systems already in service in Canada, Germany and Switzerland.



GSK

RAPT
THERAPEUTICS

GSK enters agreement to acquire RAPT Therapeutics

GSK plc has announced that it has entered a definitive agreement to acquire RAPT Therapeutics (“RAPT”) (NASDAQ: RAPT), a California-based, clinical-stage biopharmaceutical company dedicated to developing novel therapies for patients living with inflammatory and immunologic diseases. The acquisition includes ozureprubart, a long-acting anti-immunoglobulin E (IgE) monoclonal antibody, currently in phase IIb clinical development for prophylactic protection against food allergens. IgE is a clinically validated target and is the only approved systemic therapy shown to protect patients from a harmful allergic and inflammatory immune response. Around 94% of severe food allergies are caused by IgE-mediated reactions. Current anti-IgE treatment for food allergy involves injections every 2 to 4 weeks, which can be a significant burden, particularly since most patients are children. Ozureprubart’s clinical profile offers the potential for less frequent dosing of every 12 weeks, supporting improved compliance and patient outcomes; as well as providing a new option to approximately 25% of patients currently ineligible for existing therapy.

Ozureprubart complements GSK’s extensive commercial footprint and prescriber base in allergy. Data from the phase IIb trial (prestIge) assessing use of ozureprubart as monotherapy is expected in 2027, with phase III trials to be focused on both at-risk adult and paediatric populations. In the US, over 17 million people are diagnosed with food allergies, with more than 1.3 million people suffering severe reactions. This results in more than 3 million patient visits each year to hospital and emergency care. Tony Wood, Chief Scientific Officer, GSK said: “The addition of ozureprubart brings another promising new, potential best-in-class treatment to GSK’s pipeline. Food allergies cause severe health impacts to patients with existing treatment requiring injections as frequently as every 2 weeks. Ozureprubart offers the opportunity to bring sustained protection to patients with dosing every 12 weeks, and is consistent with our approach to acquire assets that address validated targets and where there is clear unmet medical need.” Under the terms of the agreement, GSK will pay RAPT Therapeutics shareholders \$58.00 per share at closing for an estimated aggregate equity value of

\$2.2 billion. Net of cash acquired, GSK’s estimated upfront investment is \$1.9 billion.

The transaction gives GSK the global rights to the ozureprubart programme, excluding mainland China, Macau, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

GSK will also be responsible for success-based milestone and royalty payments for ozureprubart owed to RAPT’s partner, Shanghai Jeyou Pharmaceutical Co., Ltd. Under the terms of the agreement, GSK’s subsidiary is obligated to commence a tender offer to acquire all outstanding shares of RAPT common stock for \$58.00 per share in cash within 10 business days of signing. The transaction is subject to customary closing conditions, including the tender of a majority of RAPT’s outstanding shares of common stock in the tender offer and expiration or termination of the applicable waiting period under the under the Hart-Scott-Rodino Act in the US. Promptly following the closing of the tender offer, GSK will acquire any shares of RAPT that are not tendered in the tender offer through a second-step merger under Delaware law at the tender offer price. GSK will account for the transaction as a business combination. The transaction is expected to close in the first quarter of 2026.



PATIENT FIRST TO TRIAL NEW LEUKAEMIA TREATMENT WITH STEVENAGE FACILITY

Stevenage based Autolus is at the centre of a new cancer treatment which could prove a game changer in the medical world.

At the start of 2026, a patient at Manchester Royal Infirmary underwent ground breaking CAR-T Therapy which saw cells removed and sent to the Stevenage lab.

These cells were then reprogrammed and returned in order to seek out and identify cancer cells.

It is believed that the immunotherapy will be funded by NHS England meaning that at least 50 patients could benefit.

A recent clinical trial showed that 77% of patients went into remission after treatment with half showing no signs of cancer three and a half years later.

The Cellares Cell Shuttle platform was the first to receive the FDA's Advanced

"If a commercial CAR T shows durable benefit, the next question is whether the industry can produce enough doses at a sustainable cost"

Manufacturing Technology (AMT) designation, which offers partners additional touchpoints and priority review mechanisms when referencing the platform in their INDs, BLAs, and post-approval supplements.

"We are evaluating obe-cel in a range of indications beyond acute leukemia, and if successful, expect future demand to exceed the manufacturing capacity at our Nucleus facility. Cellares' Cell Shuttle platform may provide an attractive option for a capital-efficient expansion of our manufacturing footprint in the future," said Christian Itin, PhD, Chief Executive Officer of Autolus.

"If a commercial CAR T shows durable benefit, the next question is whether the industry can produce enough doses at a sustainable cost," said Fabian Gerlinghaus, Co-founder and Chief Executive Officer of Cellares. "Autolus has already built a strong manufacturing foundation. Our role is to extend that foundation with a global infrastructure that can reduce cost and process failure rates, while meeting total patient demand."



Tollers article update

COMMON CAUSES THAT DELAY PROPERTY SALE TRANSACTIONS...

Following on from our article relating to the common causes that delay property sales transactions, first published in 2017 and updated in September 2022 we have updated the contact information for the various parties you may need to contact when preparing to sell your property in order to prevent any delays to the process;

1. If the property is less than 10 years old you will need to provide the new home warranty for the original construction. The most common provider is NHBC and duplicate NHBC certificates can be obtained at <https://www.nhbc.co.uk/homeowners/find-your-policy>, the current cost for a replacement is £42.00 including VAT.

"If the property has been structurally altered or extended, the relevant planning permission, building regulation approval and completion certificate (if applicable) will be required"

For certificates issued under other warranty providers please refer to the individual provider websites for details.

2. If the property has been structurally altered or extended, the relevant planning permission, building regulation approval and completion certificate (if applicable) will be required. In the event that these were not obtained when you purchased the property, you should contact the conveyancer who acted in your purchase as they may hold electronic copies that they can email to you. Please do not contact the local authority without speaking to your new conveyancer if you do not hold the consents.

If you are unsure whether any changes made by you or a previous owner would have required consent the following website details common projects and if such works would have required planning permission or building regulations approval: <https://interactive.planningportal.co.uk/explore-house>.

3. Since April 2002, the installation of new windows and glazed doors must be covered by a Building Regulation Compliance Certificate issued by a member of an authorised Competent Person Scheme being either FENSA or CERTASS or directly by the local authority.

FENSA (0207 6453700) www.fensa.org.uk/fensa-certificate. Current charge £25 including VAT online.

CERTASS (01292 502396) current charge £30 including VAT – email info@certass.com.

4. Since 1 January 2005, any rewiring or electrical alterations should be carried out by a contractor who is registered with NICEIC or NAPIT. The contractor should provide an electrical installation certificate and, unless minor works, a Building Regulation Compliance Certificate.

NICEIC (0333 0156625 – customer services) the certificate is free if requested by telephone and £32.50 including VAT if obtained online www.checkmynotification.com.

NAPIT (0345 5430330 – option 2). The charges are £36.00 including VAT for an Electronic PDF copy and £54.00 including VAT for a hard copy posted via Royal Mail. Email NAPIT customer services on info@napit.org.uk.

5. If a new boiler has been installed since 1 April 2005, any installation must be carried out by a qualified contractor. They will automatically inform the local authority that works have been carried out on your property and you will be issued with a Building Regulation Compliance Certificate.

Gas boilers:

If the boiler was installed between

"If you pay maintenance charges for shared services on your estate you will need to provide a management pack to your buyers"

April 2005 and March 2009, duplicate certificates can be obtained from CORGI (01256 548040) info@corgitechnical.com – for a fee of £40 plus vat.

If installed after March 2009, duplicate certificates can be obtained from GAS SAFE REGISTER (Tel: 0800 4085500). The current cost is £8.10 for a PDF copy <https://www.gassaferegister.co.uk/gas-safety/gas-safety-certificates-records/building-regulations-certificate/order-replacement-building-regulations-certificate/>.

Oil-fired boilers:

A duplicate installation Certificate can be obtained from OFTEC for a fee of £40.00 excluding VAT <https://www.oftec.org/consumers/order-a-certificate>

Separate building regulations approval will also be required for the installation of the oil storage tank if this has been replaced separately.

6. Any installation of a log burner requires a HETAS certificate which HETAS will be happy to provide. They can be contacted by Telephone: 01684 278170, email info@hetas.co.uk – or by visiting the website <https://www.hetas.co.uk/consumer/certificates-of-compliance/> the cost is £34.80.

7. If a chimney is swept, a certificate from the contractor is required – ensure you have a copy available.

8. You may have guarantees for damp or timber work carried out at the property and the originals will be required. In addition, the guarantee will usually

refer to a report or contract and this will also be needed. Duplicates can be obtained from the contractor.

9. An EV Charger Installation is subject to building control so you should provide the necessary certificate from your installer. If they are not registered under a competent persons scheme the relevant certificate should be obtained from the Council.

10. Cavity Wall insulation will usually be covered by a 25 year CIGA Guarantee. Duplicate certificates can be obtained for £60.00 plus VAT. Submit your request via email to guarantees@ciga.co.uk.

11. Solar Panels installed in your property are subject to building regulations. You should contact your installer in the first instance for a duplicate certificate. MCS can provide a duplicate in the event that the installer is no longer certified or no longer trading. Please visit <https://mcs-certified.com/consumers/mcs-certificate-queries/request-an-mcs-certificate/> for more information.

12. If you pay maintenance charges for shared services on your estate you will need to provide a management pack to your buyers. The cost of supplying these packs varies and can take a number of weeks to be produced. You should therefore disclose the management information to your Conveyancer at the outset of your transaction

If you need more information regarding the common causes that delay property sale transactions or are considering selling your home and would like further advice and guidance...

Talk to Tollers on 01604 258558 and our team will assist you with all your conveyancing needs.

tollers
solicitors



Kier named as one of the best places to work in the UK

Following the release of analysis based on employee reviews, leading infrastructure, construction and developments group Kier has been named as one of the best places to work in the UK Run annually by Glassdoor, one of the world's largest job and recruiting sites, the 'Best Places to Work 2026' list names the top 50 UK employers with over 1,000 people and at least 30 ratings, with past and present employees anonymously rating their places of work based on a range of criteria.

These include categories around career progression, company culture and diversity & inclusion.

Kier is the highest ranked contractor to be featured in the list, and is ranked 27th of all eligible companies.

This reflects the company's commitment to recruiting and retaining talent in the construction industry.

It is the only list of its kind which comes purely from the reviews posted by employees and former employees, with every eligible organisation with operations in the UK listed on Glassdoor



automatically reviewed to help compile the results.

These results are based on reviews posted between October 2024 and October 2025, with Glassdoor analysing each one based on sentiment, volume and company pros and cons listed by reviewers.

Kier has a current Glassdoor rating of 4.3 stars out of 5, after more than 1,500 reviews in total since joining the site, with 90% of reviewers saying they would recommend the company to a friend and 87% feeling positive about the business' outlook.

Stuart Togwell, chief executive, said: "I'm really proud to see Kier on Glassdoor's

best places to work list as this is based on feedback directly from our own people so it really matters. Our people work hard to ensure we deliver for our customers and define who we are. In turn, we work hard to think about how we support them and their careers and how to make Kier a place where everyone can belong, contribute and thrive. It's great to see that and our strong culture coming through so clearly."

Kier has a long track record with supporting its people. More than 11% are currently enrolled in formal development programmes, making Kier a Platinum member of The 5% Club, while its management training with Cranfield University has been recognised globally. The Group's latest employee engagement score was up to over 80%, an increase from 76.1% the previous year.

It is a Top 100 Apprenticeship Employer, with 590 apprentices currently at Kier, and offers career pathways for those who have previously served in the armed forces, as well as the pioneering 'Making Ground' programme, which offers training and employment to prison leavers.





65% RISE IN SELF ASSESSMENT PAYMENTS VIA THE HMRC APP

The number of people using the HMRC app to pay their Self Assessment tax bill has increased by nearly 65 percent.

Almost 340,000 people have used the HMRC app to pay their Self Assessment tax since 6 April 2025, an increase of 132,788 people compared to the same period last year.

Self Assessment customers need to file their tax return online for the 2024 to 2025 tax year and pay any tax owed by 31 January 2026. HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) is encouraging those yet to start theirs, to go to [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) and do it now. Anyone who misses the deadline could be subject to an automatic £100 penalty. Filing tax returns ahead of the deadline means knowing how much tax to pay sooner. It is quick and easy to pay via the HMRC app and set up payment reminders to make sure the deadline isn't missed. Myrtle Lloyd, HMRC's Chief Customer Officer, said: "The Self Assessment deadline is less than one month away, and thousands of people have already paid their tax bill via the HMRC app. It is quick and easy to do, and you can also see your payment history. Search 'download the

"It is quick and easy to do, and you can also see your payment history"

HMRC app' on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) to access the app and make your Self Assessment payment."

People who are unable to pay any tax owed in full may be able to set up a Time To Pay arrangement, if they meet the eligibility criteria and they owe less than £30,000.

Alternative options include paying directly through a bank account, direct debit or paying online via [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk). A full list of payment options can be found on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk). HMRC expects more than 12 million tax returns to be filed by the deadline. Those who miss the deadline will be issued with a penalty:

- an initial £100 fixed penalty, which applies even if there is no tax to pay, or if the tax due is paid on time
- after 3 months, additional daily penalties of £10 per day, up to a maximum of £900

- after 6 months, a further penalty of 5% of the tax due or £300, whichever is greater
- after 12 months, another 5% or £300 charge, whichever is greater

There are also additional penalties for paying late of 5% of the tax unpaid at 30 days, 6 months and 12 months. If tax remains unpaid after the deadline, interest will also be charged on the amount owed, in addition to the penalties above.

Customers who need assistance to complete their Self Assessment can access support and guidance online 24/7, including YouTube videos, webinars, digital assistant and step-by-step guidance covering different sections of a tax return. Most queries can be resolved online. The new High Income Child Benefit Charge (HICBC) PAYE digital service means thousands of Child Benefit claimants who are only in Self Assessment to pay HICBC can choose to pay the charge back through their tax code.

Self Assessment customers are sometimes targeted by criminals and should never share their HMRC login details with anyone, including a tax agent, if they have one. HMRC scams advice is available on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk).

THE CHARITY HUB

Supported by
The Lord-Lieutenant of Hertfordshire

The Charity Hub at Leavesden, supported by the Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire, is a collaborative office space at [Warner Bros. Studios Leavesden](#) for local charities, offering reduced-rate desks, networking, and modern facilities to foster partnerships and support community impact, with organisations using it as a base for services.

It provides charities with affordable space to work alongside each other, share resources, and connect with businesses, enhancing their effectiveness in the Watford and surrounding areas.



Forever Young People strive to be at the heart of our community and to be flexible and responsive in our approach. We aim to inspire individuals to feel valued, empowered, and confident in their abilities and to motivate individuals Educationally, Socially and Emotionally. [CLICK HERE](#) for more information



Herts Schools Outreach (HSO) is a mental health charity that works with schools to support and empower all children and young people, across the UK, who are at risk of poor mental health to recognize early warning signs and prevent them from escalating in crises.



Home-Start Watford and Three Rivers helps families in Watford, Three Rivers and Hertsmere, with at least one child

under 5, deal with the challenges they face. We intervene early to support parents as they learn to cope, improve their confidence and build better lives for their children.

[CLICK HERE](#) for more information



Supporting local residents back into employment. This support will include: At Bridge The Gap Hub we provide helping hand for job applications and CVs, providing interview tips and training for successful job applications. We provide mock interview practices. Bridge the Gap supports businesses by providing recruitment and selection training for companies.

Companies also benefit from training for issues such as work place anxiety and depression, Providing support to local businesses, social enterprises and charities helping them to identify talents within the community. Support for recruitment best practice by Linking businesses with local residents, running recruitment events in the community, company and in partnership with local schools and supporting the local job centre, assisting with job advertisement [CLICK HERE](#) for more information



Keech Hospice Care is an all-age hospice, providing care for children with a life-limiting condition from Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire & Milton Keynes, and adults from Bedfordshire, and their loved ones. The hospice was built for the community by the community. It has been caring for adult patients for over 30 years and child patients for over 20 years. We provide a

range of services both within our hospice buildings in Streatley and now in Bedford, but more extensively out in our local community.



Watford & Three Rivers Trust W3RT has worked for 50 years, which we will celebrate in May 2024, to ensure that our community benefits from voluntary groups that are welcoming, effective, accountable and sustainable, and to ensure that people can contribute to the design and delivery of the services on which they rely. Our vision is of a thriving community in which people are prosperous, informed, connected and take responsibility for the wellbeing of themselves and others. W3RT lead the CVS service supporting charities with fundraising, governance and providing support, advice, partnership opportunities and guidance to ensure their ongoing success. With support from key partners and donors, we have raised and distributed nearly £1m to local charities and have supported our member organisations to raise more than £1m. Charity Registration number: 1085518 E: llch@w3rt.org T: 01923 216950



Mediation Hertfordshire is a not-for-profit organisation that started in 1998 in the Borough of Dacorum in Hertfordshire to support people experiencing conflict in the community. Since that time, we have extended our reach across the County and now offer mediation and conflict resolution services to those experiencing disputes in the community, the family, in schools and in the workplace. We also offer training about conflict resolution. [CLICK HERE](#) for more information



Electric Umbrella believes that there is no such thing as normal! Through their work, they have created a vibrant community dedicated to empowering learning disabled and neurodivergent people through creativity and connection. [CLICK HERE](#) for more information



Say it with a Smile is a registered Charitable Incorporated Organisation (1203759) supporting people diagnosed with dementia and their loved ones in Watford and the surrounding areas. We were granted charitable status in June 2023 and were honoured to have the Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire attend and speak to our 70 guests at The Grove Hotel. A substantial number of our Smile guests and Carers attended the launch alongside key partners such as the Alzheimer's Society, W3RT, Hertswise (Mind), Mayor Peter Taylor and Luther Blissett OBE. [CLICK HERE](#) for more information



Sunnyside Rural Trust is a charity and social enterprise supporting young people and adults with learning disabilities and those on the autistic spectrum with training and employment services. We offer wellbeing support, animal care, training, work experience, paid roles and job coaching. Our social enterprises include gardening, design and plant growing, making our produce, cafés and farm shops and so much more. We have horticultural sites across Dacorum, St Albans and Three Rivers and offer outreach across Hertfordshire. [CLICK HERE](#) for more information



A Project of W3RT. Supporting the business community of Watford and West Hertfordshire. Helping our members develop their businesses, and bring benefit to the wider community in which they trade. Connecting Commerce with Community [CLICK HERE](#) for more information



Former Players Club has been created by the original Rocket Men and Golden Boys who rose to glory under Graham Taylor OBE at Watford FC and have united to continue his teachings and community spirit. They run a series of projects across Watford and the surrounding areas including supporting Ukrainian guests as well as current and former veterans living in the town. [CLICK HERE](#) for more information



The Steve Sinnott Foundation works with teachers and educators to deliver projects that progress the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 – ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. We are proud to work toward making this goal a reality. [CLICK HERE](#) for more information



Goods For Good is a humanitarian charity delivering hope, comfort, and care to vulnerable people across the UK and around the world. The charity repurposes

high-quality new and unsold essentials – including clothing, footwear, bedding, and hygiene products – that might otherwise end up in landfill. These items are distributed to people living in crisis and poverty, helping to restore dignity, relieve hardship, and promote environmental sustainability by reducing waste. Website link [Supporting people to thrive | Goods for Good](#) Contact info@goodsgood.org.uk



Accountants for Charities is a specialist accountancy service dedicated to supporting charities, not-for-profit organisations, and social enterprises. Supporting small charitable organisations to amplify their impact, we work with a range of charities to deliver positive social impact. We understand the unique financial, governance, and regulatory challenges the sector faces, and we provide expert guidance to ensure compliance, transparency, and long-term sustainability. Our services include preparing annual accounts and independent examinations, managing day-to-day bookkeeping and payroll, and offering strategic financial advice tailored to trustees and management teams. We also assist with Gift Aid claims, VAT considerations, and charity registration, helping organisations maximise their resources and remain fully compliant with Charity Commission and HMRC requirements. At Accountants for Charities, we combine professional expertise with a genuine commitment to the sector. Our mission is to give trustees and charity leaders peace of mind, enabling them to focus on their cause while we take care of the financial details. Whether you are a small community group or a large charitable trust, we provide clear, affordable, and practical accountancy solutions to help you grow and thrive.

Good Business Week '26: A CORNERSTONE FOR BRITISH ETHICAL CAPITALISM?

How a movement founded by one of Britain's most radical entrepreneurs is challenging businesses to prove that profit and purpose aren't just compatible—they're inseparable.

There's a delicious irony in the fact that one of capitalism's most "vocal" reformers made his fortune selling hi-fi equipment. Julian Richer, who opened his first Richer Sounds shop near London Bridge in 1978 aged just 19, didn't set out to revolutionise business ethics; he simply wanted to create a company where people - both staff and customers - weren't treated as disposable resources to be exploited for maximum extraction. Four decades later, that shop still held the Guinness World Record for the highest sales per square foot of any retail outlet globally, and Richer has given majority ownership to his employees whilst founding the Good Business Charter to prove a point: doing right by people isn't morally superior, it's commercially brilliant.

From the 9th to the 13th February 2026, Good Business Week returns with a challenge that should make every business leader pause mid-spreadsheet: what if the companies that treat their people fairly, pay their taxes honestly, source ethically, and protect the environment aren't the exception, but the norm? And what if businesses that don't meet these standards find themselves increasingly isolated in a marketplace where 97% of consumers are demanding responsible behaviour?

Welcome to the quiet revolution that's rewriting the rules of British capitalism.

THE CHARTER THAT DARED TO DEFINE "GOOD"

The Good Business Charter emerged from a simple observation: too often, organisations doing the right thing go without recognition whilst those cutting corners dominate headlines. Founded by Richer in collaboration with the CBI, TUC, and FSB (an alliance that itself speaks volumes about cross-sector appetite for change), the Charter does something radical in its simplicity: it defines what "good business" actually means.



Ten components, clear standards, achievable for organisations of all sizes. To earn GBC accreditation, an organisation must commit to: paying the Real Living Wage; offering fairer hours and contracts; supporting employee wellbeing; ensuring employee representation; advancing equality, diversity and

inclusion; demonstrating environmental responsibility; paying fair tax; committing to customers; sourcing ethically; and paying suppliers promptly.

"The combination of demonstrating progress against easy-to-understand high standards can help demystify ethics..and better inform customer choice," notes George Gordon, Corporate Affairs Director at TSB, one of the Charter's accredited organisations. It's a framework that transforms unclear aspirations about "corporate social responsibility" into measurable commitments.

This clarity matters because, as John Elkington, the British sustainability pioneer who coined the term "triple bottom line" in 1994, observed in his 2020 book *Green Swans*, we need businesses to move beyond merely minimising harm toward actively regenerating the societies



and ecosystems they touch. The Good Business Charter provides the scaffolding for that transformation.

FROM "FORCES FOR GOOD" TO A FORCE MULTIPLIER

Paul Hargreaves understands the power of collective action. The CEO of Cotswold Fayre and author of *Forces for Good* (2019) and *The Fourth Bottom Line* (2021) has spent years arguing that businesses must embrace the triple bottom line of people, planet, and profit.. but only after leaders develop the fourth bottom line of personal compassion and noble character.

"I am very aware personally that attempting to change the world involves personal change too," Hargreaves writes. His fifty-day workbook on leadership qualities challenges entrepreneurs to banish "outdated, paternalistic, command-and-control leadership" in favour of servant-hearted approaches that genuinely value employees as human beings rather than as "human resources". And he lives these values. Cotswold Fayre, which became one of the UK's founding B Corporations, donates 25.6% of profits to charitable causes whilst maintaining commercial success as the leading speciality food wholesaler to UK retailers. The business case for ethical practices isn't theoretical, it's demonstrated daily in companies like Hargreaves' that have proved treating people well and prioritising sustainability enhances rather than diminishes profitability.

"Drawing on four decades of hands-on management experience," Julian Richer wrote in *The Ethical Capitalist* (2018) that "ethically run businesses are invariably more efficient, more motivated and more innovative than those that care only about the bottom line." It's worth noting that Richer didn't just write this; he demonstrated it by transferring 60% of his company's shares (worth £9.2 million) to an Employee Ownership Trust in 2019, alongside a £4 million "thank you" bonus distributed to staff, based on years of service.

When business leaders of this calibre say that ethical practices drive success, they're not offering opinions. They're sharing empirical results from their own balance sheets.

THE TEN COMPONENTS: A PRACTICAL BLUEPRINT FOR REFORM



Good Business Week's theme this year of "Raising the Bar Together" recognises that individual ethical companies remain vulnerable in a system that often rewards exploitation. But collective action creates new norms. Let's examine what the Charter actually asks of businesses:

1. Real Living Wage

Not the government minimum, but the genuine living wage calculated by the Living Wage Foundation based on actual living costs. Richer went further at Richer Sounds, paying cleaning contractors extra to ensure their employees earned this rate even though they weren't directly employed by his company. This is capitalism acknowledging that someone working full-time shouldn't struggle to afford food and housing.

2. Fairer Hours and Contracts

The Charter requires fair shift scheduling, reasonable cancellation policies, and proper consideration for guaranteed-hours contracts. It's the antithesis of the gig economy's worst terms.

3. Employee Wellbeing

Clear policies supporting mental and physical health, with no penalties for

legitimate illness. That starts with creating workplaces where people can thrive, rather than merely survive.

4. Employee Representation

A voice for workers around the boardroom table. Not radical socialism, but basic stakeholder engagement. Companies like John Lewis have demonstrated for over a century that employee ownership and representation generate superior outcomes.

5. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Evidence-based approaches to addressing disadvantage and discrimination. Monitoring data isn't box-ticking; it's accountability.

6. Environmental Responsibility

An environmental policy demonstrating commitment to reducing impact. John Elkington's concept of "Green Swans" (exponential solutions emerging from the intersection of environmental, social, and economic challenges) requires businesses to see environmental stewardship not as compliance cost but as innovation driver.

7. Pay Fair Tax

Richer founded TaxWatch in 2018 to expose aggressive corporate tax





avoidance. The Charter requires organisations to pay their fair share and maintain transparency with HMRC. It's capitalism acknowledging that free-riding on public infrastructure whilst dodging the bill isn't responsible.

8. Commitment to Customers

Published commitments, monitored feedback, board-level reporting. "We should be aiming to keep a customer for life, not for one transaction," Richer wrote, articulating what should be obvious but somehow isn't: sustainable businesses require sustainable customer relationships.

9. Ethical Sourcing

Commitment to Ethical Trading Initiative standards through continuous due diligence. Hargreaves personally visited factories in China supplying Cotswold Fayre. Supply chain ethics matter because exploitation anywhere pollutes the entire system.

10. Prompt Payment to Suppliers

Signing the government's Prompt Payment Code. Late payment kills

small businesses. Large companies that use suppliers as uncompensated credit lines are engaged in systematic wealth extraction from those least able to afford it.

None of these standards are revolutionary. All are eminently achievable. Together, they constitute a comprehensive redefinition of minimum acceptable business behaviour.

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR BEING GOOD

John Blakey's 2024 book *Force for Good: How to Thrive as a Purpose-Driven Leader* introduces the "UP, IN, and OUT" framework for purpose-driven leadership. UP refers to connecting with higher purpose, IN to developing self-awareness and character, OUT to serving others and society. It's a framework that perfectly captures what the Good Business Charter operationalises: businesses that look up to their principles, in to their culture, and out to their impact don't just perform differently, they perform better.

"Ethically run businesses are invariably more efficient, more motivated and more innovative than those that care only about the bottom line," Richer observed. The evidence supports this:

- Simone Wyatt, Sustainable Business and Social Impact Manager at Aviva, notes that GBC accreditation "has proven valuable when Aviva's clients ask about our credentials and has even delivered new business opportunities. Having the GBC seal of approval has become a powerful and differentiating selling point."
- Carl Wright, Sustainability Lead at Clive Owen LLP, explains that accreditation "reinforces our dedication to providing a rewarding, diverse and inclusive environment that promotes personal growth and development for all colleagues, while ensuring transparency and consistency across our operations."
- The founders of Avorium observe that "employees are genuinely excited to come to work, and we find that kind, friendly customer service pays off in terms of sales and customer loyalty."

These aren't anomalies. They're predictable outcomes of treating stakeholders as partners rather than resources to extract value from until they're exhausted.

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW MORE THAN EVER

We're living through what Elkington calls the transition from "Black Swan" crises (unexpected disasters) to potential "Green Swan" solutions (exponential regenerative breakthroughs). Climate change, inequality, and social fracture aren't going away. The question is whether businesses will be part of the problem, or part of the solution.

Good Business Week 2026 arrives at a moment when public patience with exploitative capitalism has worn threadbare. When corporations post record profits whilst employees use food banks, when tax avoidance costs the Exchequer billions whilst public services crumble, when environmental destruction accelerates whilst corporations have greenwashed their marketing. People notice, and increasingly, they act. A 97% consumer demand for responsible business behaviour represents enormous

commercial opportunity for companies willing to meet it. The Good Business Charter provides a clear, trusted signpost to organisations deserving of that custom, giving customers information to make informed choices.

But there's a deeper opportunity here. As Hargreaves wrote in *Forces for Good*, "The traditional profit-first model is outdated and unsustainable. Businesses have a responsibility to be forces for good." This isn't altruism, it's enlightened self-interest. Companies that build trust, loyalty, and genuine relationships with stakeholders create resilient businesses capable of weathering disruption.

THE POWER OF "TOGETHER"

"Raising the Bar Together" is a recognition that individual virtuous companies remain islands in an ocean of indifference. But when organisations collectively commit to higher standards, they can shift the entire ecosystem.

This is why Good Business Week matters. It's not about one organisation demonstrating its virtue whilst competitors free-ride. It's about creating a movement where responsible behaviour becomes the baseline expectation and failure to meet these standards carries reputational and commercial consequences.

The Charter's collaborative founding—bringing together the CBI (business), TUC (labour), and FSB (small firms)—demonstrates that appetite for change spans traditional divides. When employer groups and trade unions can agree on standards, it suggests those standards represent achievable common ground rather than partisan ideology.

AN INVITATION TO IMAGINE

So here's a thought to ponder on, as Good Business Week approaches: What would Britain look like if the Good Business Charter's ten components became the baseline expectation for every materially-sized organisation, say above £5m annual revenue and 20 staff?

Imagine a business landscape where paying the Real Living Wage was standard, where zero-hours exploitation was extinct, where employee wellbeing policies were universal, where workers had genuine voice in governance, where equality and diversity were systematically advanced, where environmental stewardship was

embedded in every strategy, where tax transparency was the norm, where customer commitment was auditable, where supply chains were ethically monitored, and where suppliers received prompt payment as a matter of course. This wouldn't be some sort of constrained economy where businesses limped along under regulatory burden. It would be an innovation ecosystem where trust, loyalty, engagement, and resilience generated superior long-term returns. Where breakthrough ideas flourished and the most talented people competed to join organisations whose values matched their own. Where customers became advocates because companies had earned their trust. Where supply chains strengthened into collaborative partnerships and environmental challenges were tackled positively.

The entrepreneurs who've built successful businesses on these principles are pioneers showing us what's possible. Practical, achievable standards that thousands of organisations are already meeting. The Good Business Charter doesn't require perfection, it requires commitment to clear, measurable practices that any well-run organisation can implement.

What if meeting these standards wasn't a ceiling on your ambition but a foundation for innovation you haven't yet imagined?

RAISING THE BAR

Good Business Week 2026 represents an invitation rather than an ultimatum. It's an opportunity to join a growing community of organisations that have discovered something remarkable: that doing good and doing well aren't opposing choices, but complementary reinforcing capabilities.

The Charter's collaborative founding on bringing together business groups, trade unions, and small firm representatives, demonstrates that higher standards serve everyone's interests. When organisations collectively commit to responsible behaviour, they don't disadvantage themselves relative to competitors; they raise expectations across entire sectors. This is why the "together" in "Raising the Bar Together" matters so profoundly. When a pioneering spirit spreads across industries and regions, it transforms what's expected. And when enough organisations embed these practices,

they stop being noteworthy and instead become the new normal.. which is precisely when their power multiplies. Picture yourself twelve months from now, looking back on Good Business Week 2026. What could this moment represent? It could be the week when your organisation stepped forward and joined a movement reshaping British capitalism. When you showcased your responsible practices to customers, employees, and partners who responded with renewed trust and enthusiasm. When conversations within your leadership team opened up new possibilities about what becomes achievable when you treat ethics not as constraint but as opportunity.

Might your organisation displaying the GBC accreditation mark be transformed? Attracting exceptional talent who actively sought you out; winning contracts with customers who value responsible partners; building supply-chain relationships based on genuine partnership; creating a workplace where people bring their best selves, generating returns that demonstrate to even the most analytical board members that responsible business practices are competitive advantage.

The future of capitalism is being shaped by the accumulated decisions of thousands of organisations choosing, day after day, to raise the bar on how business is done, because they've glimpsed what becomes possible when you do.

Good Business Week 2026 is your chance to be part of that transformation. To explore what's possible. To contribute your creativity to solving some of the most interesting challenges in modern business. To build something that generates prosperity whilst creating genuine value for everyone.

The question isn't "What's the minimum we need to do?" but rather "What's the maximum good we could create?"

What could you build? What innovations might emerge? What relationships might you strengthen? What impact might you create? What legacy might you leave? Good Business Week 2026 is your invitation to find out.

For more information about Good Business Charter accreditation and how to participate in Good Business Week 2026, visit goodbusinesscharter.com



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