Starting a business in the UK: your first-year checklist

New businesses rarely fail on the accounting; they get hurt by the deadlines and registrations nobody told them about. Here is the first year on one page. Tick each item off, and if anything is unclear, ask us — the first conversation is free.

1. Choose your structure

- Sole trader — you are the business. Simple to start; you are personally liable for its debts.
- Limited company — a separate legal person, registered at Companies House, with more filing duties.

Not sure? Read Sole trader or limited company? How to decide.

2. Register with HMRC

- Sole trader: you must register for Self Assessment if you earn more than £1,000 from self-employment in a tax year (6 April to 5 April). Tell HMRC by 5 October after the end of the tax year in which you started, or you could get a penalty.
- Limited company: register the company at Companies House and set it up for Corporation Tax at the same time.

3. Know your VAT trigger

You must register for VAT if your taxable turnover in the last 12 months goes over £90,000, or if you expect it to go over £90,000 in the next 30 days. You have to register within 30 days of the end of the month in which you went over.

4. Before you pay anyone — including yourself

If you employ staff, or you are the only director of your own company and pay yourself a salary, you must register as an employer with HMRC before the first payday. You cannot register more than two months before you start paying people.

5. The dates to put in the diary

- Self Assessment: online return and any tax due by 31 January; second payment on account 31 July; paper returns by 31 October.
- Corporation Tax: pay 9 months and 1 day after the end of your accounting period; file the Company Tax Return 12 months after it.
- Companies House: first accounts 21 months after incorporation, then 9 months after each financial year end; a confirmation statement at least once every 12 months, filed within 14 days of the end of your review period (£50 online).

- VAT: return and payment one calendar month and 7 days after the end of each VAT period.
- Making Tax Digital for Income Tax: applies from 6 April 2026 to sole traders and landlords with qualifying income over £50,000, from April 2027 over £30,000, and from April 2028 over £20,000 — see our guide.

6. Keep the right records, for long enough

- Open a separate business bank account and keep every invoice, receipt and bank statement.
- Sole traders: keep records for at least 5 years after the 31 January submission deadline of the relevant tax year.
- Limited companies: keep accounting records for 6 years from the end of the financial year they relate to.
- Use bookkeeping software from day one — it is a requirement under Making Tax Digital and it makes everything else easier.

7. Get the free assessment

Bring this list to your free initial assessment. We will tell you which items apply to you, take the filings off your desk, and track every deadline for you.

Sources: GOV.UK — Set up as a sole trader · GOV.UK — Register for Self Assessment · GOV.UK — Corporation Tax · GOV.UK — VAT registration · GOV.UK — Register as an employer · GOV.UK — Self Assessment deadlines · GOV.UK — Company Tax Returns · GOV.UK — Annual accounts · GOV.UK — Confirmation statement · GOV.UK — VAT Returns · GOV.UK — How long to keep your records (self-employed) · GOV.UK — Company and accounting records · GOV.UK — Making Tax Digital for Income Tax