

MSB Solicitors presents

Highlight

*Business in the
community of Liverpool*



Communities in action

Showcasing the charities across our city region doing incredible things in their communities.

Home is where the heart is

The vibrant independent culture making our city what it is.

Spotlight

Discussing the impact of mental health in the workplace with business leaders.

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Welcome...

To the first edition of Highlight – a magazine created to showcase the very best of our communities.

As we started this year, it's safe to say we have all been hoping for a better one. The past 12 months have brought with them challenges that none of us could have predicted and lives have been impacted in ways that we could never have imagined.

Despite facing unprecedented adversity, so many have proven themselves to be unbelievably resilient, adapting wherever possible and coming out of the other side stronger than ever. It has been humbling and heart-warming to see communities coming together to support one another, whether through lending a hand to a neighbour, choosing to shop locally, signing petitions or supporting independent businesses.

Highlight has been designed to provide our city region's individuals and businesses who have done just that with a platform to showcase the fantastic work they are doing, and to shine a light on the incredible things happening on our doorstep.

We'll hear from businesses large and small across a whole host of sectors, as well as amazing charities that do so much for their communities and have been so pivotal not just over the past year, but always.

We hope you enjoy the first edition of Highlight magazine. If you want to find out more about anything featured in this edition, or if you'd like to be part of the next one, please get in touch. We would love to hear from you.

Thank you.

Emma Carey,
Managing Partner
MSB Solicitors

"It has been humbling and heart-warming to see communities coming together to support one another."





Making waves

An Interview with Jordan Wright

We're fortunate to have a huge number of incredible people in our city region, who are having a significant impact on their communities and are making a difference.

Jordan Wright is one of these people. The 33-year-old has built an incredible career as Managing Director at Little League Sports (LLS) and Your Tour, Director of the Steven Gerrard Academy and Fellow of Liverpool Hope University Business School.

It all started in 2008, when Jordan and his school friend, Joe Mulhearn invested their student loans into making their dream of creating a sports coaching company a reality.

The pair started with one coaching class with 30 children, and soon became a market leading sixth form education provider.

Over the past twelve years, LLS had an impact on thousands of young people, many whom have gone on to have incredibly successful careers.

We spoke to Jordan about his journey so far and what is next for LLS...

What is your background?

I graduated from Liverpool Hope University in 2009 with a degree in Childhood, Youth & Education and was very proud to be made an Honorary Fellow of the university’s Business School in 2018. I’ve always been really passionate about sport and business and enjoy supporting the next generation of entrepreneurs.

What does LLS do?

LLS trains the next generation of sports industry professionals – global coaches, physiotherapists, teachers and sports analysts to name a few. Through its sixth form courses, young people learn everything they need to know about the industry, and at the end of the two-year course, students are able to choose between continuing their education at university, entering full time employment or becoming a coach in one of the LLS destinations across the world.

What is your role at LLS?

As Managing Director and co-founder I’m in charge of overseeing certain LLS programmes and constantly try to add value to different parts of the business. It is important to be innovative and that is exactly what we are as a team. This has been especially important throughout the pandemic to keep our students and the team motivated – we’ve needed to be fully focused. I spend every day speaking to the teams across the country, catching up with students and working closely with the senior team members who lead their areas.

What has the organisation’s journey been like so far?

Our journey so far has been an exciting and adventurous one: our staff and graduates have taught children around the world, we became Guinness World Record holders for the longest ever non-stop football match, our services have been utilised by Premier League Football Clubs and we now deliver our sixth form courses across England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Tenerife and Qatar.

Joe and I have built an incredible team of over 40 likeminded staff. We have created a positive work environment and a culture of hard work and professionalism. We’re really proud of everything we’ve achieved so far.

What are some of your most significant milestones?

Collaborating with LFC Foundation in 2012 was a big step for us as it allowed us to expand to over 100 primary schools in the region.

In 2015, we were named Business of the Year at the Liverpool Echo Regional Awards, which was a proud moment for the team. In 2016, we created Your Tour, the dynamic tourism arm of the business which organises trips for sports teams across the world and so far, we’ve welcomed over 180 tours to Liverpool.

In the same year we launched LLS in Qatar and have grown considerably across the UK and Northern Ireland since then.



How has the pandemic impacted LLS?

The pandemic was a big challenge and had an instant impact on us. As schools closed and travel was discouraged, our sixth form courses moved to online, and our Your Tour tourism branch came to an abrupt halt. Despite the challenges though, we took the opportunity to pause and reflect on our work and use the time to make our programmes even stronger for the future. We’re really proud of the spirit and leadership of our team throughout the pandemic.

We also joined forces with the Steven Gerrard Academy and have already grown and developed programmes with them on a national and international scale. Watch this space for more developments!

Do you feel positive about the future?

2020 was a hugely challenging year for most, but it’s made us more determined and optimistic than ever. We feel reenergised and ready to enter 2021 with a clear direction of where we’re heading and what we want to achieve.

Joe has grown the sixth form education programme throughout the whole of Wales, and we have gained more education partners across England and Northern Ireland during the pandemic.

Schools and communities nationwide need these courses for young people, and we won’t let anything get in the way of our development which is so beneficial to participants. We currently have over 600 full time students and will grow to over 1,000 students in the next 18 months.

What’s next for LLS?

We have many exciting plans for 2021 including the launch of our first site in the capital, which will see our sixth form programme start in schools in London. We also can’t wait to get our tours back running in 2021, bigger and better than before.

As a team, we constantly want to improve all student experiences and we are passionate about making our programmes and their destinations very successful. There’s nothing better than seeing students grow and develop into successful employment or university-ready young adults.

We have lots of incredible alumni working in all corners of the world who represent us and themselves incredibly well. We are looking forward to moving forward and will continue to help shape the sports industry professionals of the future.

To find out more about LLS, visit: www.llsonline.uk

Communities in action



*Ben Osu,
Strategic &
Communications Lead,
Anthony Walker
Foundation*

In this feature, we showcase the charities across our city region who are doing incredible things in their communities.

For our first edition, we are focusing on the Anthony Walker Foundation, an incredible organisation which tackles racism, hate crime and discrimination by providing educational opportunities, victim support services and by promoting equity and inclusion for all.

We recently spoke to Ben Osu, the Anthony Walker Foundation’s Strategy & Communications Lead, about the Foundation’s ambitions and how the past year’s events have impacted their work.

How did the Anthony Walker Foundation come to be and what is its ambition?

The Anthony Walker Foundation was established after the racially motivated murder of Anthony Walker in Huyton, 2005. The family didn’t want Anthony’s murder to be just another statistic or for anyone else or another family to go through what they have been through, so set up the Foundation to help tackle racism, support those who have experienced hate crimes and work with young people and communities on a number of education initiatives.

The year 2020 marked the 15th anniversary of Anthony’s murder and our work is as important now as it’s ever been. Last year, the BBC in partnership with local production company, LA Productions, produced and aired a primetime drama called ‘Anthony’, which looked at the life he could’ve had – marriage, kids, career success – in a bid to show the real harms of hate.

How do you engage with local communities to spread the message and educate people?

The Foundation delivers a number of activities to spread the message. We deliver a lot of educational programmes in schools and colleges. In 2019 we engaged with around 10,000 young people in schools and colleges delivering education programmes around anti-racism, hate crime awareness and diversity and inclusion. We support those who have experienced hate crime through a dedicated helpline/ support service. We have a focus on race and religious based hate crimes but work with partners who specialise in offering support to those from the LGBT+ community and those who experience hate crimes because of a disability.

Anthony had ambitions of being a lawyer and wanted to go to the US and work in human rights law. The Foundation, in partnership with LJMU and the Crown Prosecution Service, set up the Anthony Walker Law Bursary to support those from Black and minority ethnic communities who wanted to enter the profession. Currently, only around 14% of the legal profession are made up of people from Black or minority ethnic communities.



We are also currently working in partnership with social enterprise Agent Academy to develop and launch a digital hate crime reporting system and create a youth-led hate crime awareness campaign. The digital platform will allow us to understand the needs of the community and give us a real time look at the situation with regards to hate crime and allow us to provide effective interventions.

“If you witness racism or any other type of injustice, call it out. Let people know it’s not acceptable and is not something that will be tolerated in our city region.”

How has the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement impacted the Foundation?

BLM has shone a new light on the work we do at the Foundation and brought a new wave of interest. For a long time, we felt like it was struggle to get our voice heard and I know others who work in the same field did too.

BLM, as a movement, has made me feel like we’re not out there on our own anymore. I feel like there is now an army of people from all backgrounds calling for action against racism. There has been a tremendous amount of interest in our Corporate Partnership work which has opened doors to us working with employers to help create safer and more supportive workplaces and more and more schools are contacting us to run educational programmes.

How do you hope to keep this momentum going?

We plan to keep our name in the spotlight and on the tip of people’s tongues by creating effective and impactful partnerships with businesses and employers across the region. Our work with businesses like MSB is vital to keeping Anthony’s legacy alive and ensuring our message reaches a wider audience. We’re also looking into developing some key insight and engagement projects which will enable us to get out into communities to understand what is going on and let people know we’re here to support them if they need it.

What can businesses and individuals in be doing to make sure our city region is inclusive as possible?

We all have a responsibility to make sure that our city region is an inclusive and safe place to live, work and play. Individuals can do more by standing up and speaking out. If you witness racism or any other type of injustice, call it out. Let people know it’s not acceptable and is not something that will be tolerated in our city region. Reading more and understanding other cultures is key – pick up a book and explore opinions and cultures that are different to your own.

Businesses can play their part by ensuring their teams are representative of society. Take a step back and look at your business; are you lacking people

from the BAME, LGBT+ or gender spectrum communities? Could you be doing more to increase representation in your organisation? If your organisation supports local charities, maybe look to support charity that works in the equalities space.

What does the future look like for AWF?

The future for the Anthony Walker Foundation is very bright. We’re going from strength to strength and the opportunities and possibilities ahead of us are very exciting.

We have some new projects that we’ll be onboarding in the next year or so and have the ambition to help us have an impact and change lives.

To find out more about the Anthony Walker Foundation, its work and how you can show your support, visit:



Delivering excellence

The impact of Brexit on Family Law



Emma Palmer,
Partner and
Emma Carey,
Managing Partner at
MSB Solicitors

The world of Family Law is sensitive and often complex. No more so have we seen these complexities come to the forefront and multiply than during the past year, with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit causing a huge amount of change, for people personally and in legislation.

Brexit is already having an impact on people with multinational and multi-jurisdictional lifestyles, business, family and property interests and with around 3.8 million EU citizens living in the UK, family law and in particular divorces and child arrangement issues, are impacted significantly.

From divorce and separation with regards to financial settlements, to the movement of children upon separation, Brexit has affected it all.

Before Brexit, the international agreements that were in place to carry out divorces or child arrangements were much more co-operative. Now, working with legislation in other countries has become more complex.

However, although the trade agreement went right down to the wire, the family law implications were worked out further in advance and the shape of things to come had been known for a few months.

In all areas of family law, EU law has made the greatest difference in the area of jurisdiction. That is, setting the grounds on which a particular country's courts have power to deal with a dispute. For cases about the upbringing of children, the key concept is habitual residence. This means that the courts in the place where the child has their current home will usually settle questions relating to that child's upbringing.

In most cases, deciding on a child's habitual residence is straightforward. However, for those families who split their time between different locations internationally or are in the process of relocating, it can be more complicated. This is no more the case than when a parent has taken a child across an international boarder against the wishes of or without permission from the other. This is known as international abduction.

Up until the end of the Brexit transition period, EU law largely made its presence felt in the area of jurisdiction. EU member states including the UK, decided on a common framework for deciding which territories' court should handle certain cases.

When it comes to divorce, that decision would frequently be based on where you live and, sometimes,

with which other place you have significant connections. Following Brexit, the main change is the promotion of sole domicile from a ground of jurisdiction available only when no other court of a member state has jurisdiction. Domicile is a technical term referring to an individual's connection to a particular legal system. Even if you live and work overseas, a person born in England and Wales may retain their domicile here until they can be considered to be permanently living in a new country. Before Brexit, starting divorce proceedings on the basis of one party's domicile alone could carry significant disadvantages for the financial settlement they are able to secure. Now, these disadvantages are reduced.

In some cases, both parties who are eligible to get divorced in different EU member states may decide to start proceedings in a different country. This can cause complications and can lead to a jurisdiction "race". Prior to Brexit whoever submitted their application first 'wins', and the divorce proceedings are carried out in that country, post-Brexit it is no longer this simple and divorce proceedings can potentially take place in both countries with a race to the finish line.

Just like divorce, the actual law on how financial settlements are determined has been a matter for individual member states. Again, just like divorce, EU member states, including the UK, agreed a common framework for dealing with jurisdiction to decide and enforce "maintenance", or financial provision.

For the last nine years, we have used a piece of EU legislation known as the Maintenance Regulation to establish jurisdiction and handle mutual recognition and enforcement of orders made in each member state (except Denmark). Now, this is no longer a part of UK law.

The changes will make financial orders made in the UK more complex to enforce and there may be particular local issues around recognition of divorces.

What is clear is that both Brexit and the resulting effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are causing significant changes across all aspects of life, and the law is no exception. Regardless of the changes that will come next, Family Law matters are, for some people, the hardest time of their lives. Whatever happens, we'll be here to offer guidance and support for those who need it.



Home is where the heart is

Liverpool is a city that is incredibly proud of its vibrant culture, with independent businesses, shops, cafes, restaurants, florists and everything in between making our city what it is.

The past year has been incredibly difficult for so many businesses which have been severely impacted by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. We have seen some of our favourite local small businesses invest in health and safety equipment, carry out risk assessments and put social distancing measures in place, only to be forced to close a mere few weeks later, in many cases resulting in job losses and tragically, permanent closure.

More than ever, we need to be supporting the businesses and the people who continue to make us proud of the city region we call home. Here, we share just a few businesses who have adapted during this challenging time...



Alpha Cars

Alpha Cars Liverpool Ltd, launched in the 1980's, is a private hire and taxi operator based across Merseyside. The firm has recently expanded into the delivery market, partnering with other local businesses through its new app, Alpha Grab.

We spoke to Operations Manager, Anthony Bradley.

How has the pandemic impacted your business and how have you adapted?

It has been significant, but not insurmountable, both during and between lockdowns. The lockdown periods restricted movement to essential travel only and the other restrictions during non-lockdown phases certainly changed the nature of business for the majority of 2020.

We planned an initial response in early February once it became clear the virus was easily spread. This initial plan involved reducing driver fees to provide financial assistance, acquiring masks, sanitisers and temporary screens. Other areas of successful adaptations were with utilising our cloud-based dispatch system and keeping communication regular and coherent. We invested heavily in the past in remote capabilities as a possible crisis management tool, hoping it would never be needed to a great extent but thankfully when we needed it the system was ready to go.

We were able to set up all the call centre staff with no associated downtime even before the restrictions took effect so that services could flow as normal, in hindsight this was a particular comfort to our customers who are not confident with technology or prefer human interaction as they did not need to change their behaviour when booking. In fact, it's fair to say we have made an extra effort this year to not miss a call.

The other adaptation we have utilised well has been with regular communication. A particular area of success was with the implementation of a web-based driver portal, allowing drivers to engage with the driver liaison team from the safety of their own home. We have to mention MSB's support here as well, as we have taken up their advisory retainer model, meaning we have a mutually beneficial relationship. Chris Hayes and his team have been a steady source of knowledge and have helped us to adapt even when the rules seemed to be evolving daily at times. Having a communicative and knowledgeable partner in the MSB team has been invaluable.

Do you feel positive about the future?

Honestly, yes, we feel we have likely been through the worst now with vaccine announcements and improving hospital treatments. We have been able to stay active and even make improvements to our platform during a difficult time and have not sat idle or accepted defeat. Our customer app for example was competitive enough to leave as it was, but rather than cut back we've invested in it further, allowing customers to select screen fitted vehicles for example and made it more card friendly with estimate fares. We have renewed confidence that we can push on stronger – not only is our customer base is larger than ever we are now better suited to meet their requirements.

What's next for your business?

We can't say too much just now as we don't want to jinx what we have in store! We certainly don't plan to stay quiet. The past has allowed us to analyse each layer of the business and we've made notable improvements. We always plan to improve and expand our service.

“Appreciating this year has been catastrophic for some businesses, we are grateful our customers have remained loyal to us.”



Empire Retail Group

Established in 2005, Empire Retail Group has grown to over 40 stores across the North West and the East of the UK. The organisation is comprised of Bargain Booze off licences, Select Convenience stores and a Winerack bar and store, providing affordable necessities to the local community 365 days a year. We heard from People Director, Emma Sheridan

How has the pandemic impacted your business and how have you adapted?

The pandemic has had a significant impact on our business. In anticipation, we started to plan in January 2020 for the potential impact of staying open and trading through, and so as we entered March and the imminent lockdown, we had already carried out risk assessments on all our stores and established Covid-19 secure practices that included mandatory wearing of face masks or visors. In the early stages of the pandemic, we closed two of our more at-risk stores for a period of time, whilst we learnt to manage the risk before re-opening both in the summer.

We introduced conference calls for the Store Managers twice weekly initially, so that we could communicate swiftly with them on any changes to our working practices, the Government’s latest advice and the impact it would have on us, and also, so we could keep them up to date with what we as a company were doing to keep them and our customers safe. To-date, we have spent over £100,000 on PPE to protect our teams and customers. We have also sent home face masks and sanitiser to our teams’ families in the early phase of the pandemic (when it was difficult to source these items as they were out of stock), to support them maintaining a safe environment for their families too.

Appreciating this year has been catastrophic for some businesses, we are grateful our customers have remained loyal to us, with new customers being established as shopping locally in the community has increased, which has helped our business stay afloat and perform well.

Do you feel positive about the future?

The wider context of “the future” is starting to become somewhat easier to think about as more is understood about the virus and we are seeing positive news about vaccines. We do feel very positive about the future of Empire Retail Group. We have performed well despite the unprecedented adversity faced, and this is down to the amazing team we have who showed up for us when we and our customers needed them to.

What’s next for your business?

We will continue to stay focused on ensuring a safe working and shopping environment as we move forward. We are pleased to share that we are opening two new stores in early 2021 and moving to new office premises to support the growth and expansion of the group. We have also been working in the background on a new business venture and our new brand will launch online early next year.



Laura’s Little Bakery

Founded in 2010, Laura’s Little Bakery is a cake maker and decorator service based in South Liverpool, supplying cakes, cupcakes and baked goodies for corporates, cafes, restaurants, weddings, birthdays and every other event imaginable.

We spoke to Founder, Laura Worthington.

How has the pandemic impacted your business and how have you adapted?

Thankfully, the pandemic has in many ways had a positive impact on the business. I have never been busier, partly because I ensured the business remained accessible by keeping payments contactless, creating a delivery service and keeping prices affordable.

What’s next for your business?

I think during these very unpredictable times it’s difficult to plan anything really, but honestly, I’m happy just to evolve organically for the time being and to carry on creating delicious cakes.

Here’s to another year of supporting Liverpool’s brilliant independent businesses.

Do you feel positive about the future?

I do feel very positive, I’m very passionate about my business and that’s the best driving force to have!



Maximum Impact Solutions

Julia Emelogu founded her IT consultancy, Maximum Impact Solutions in 2001. Specialising in business intelligence and based in Liverpool, Maximum Impact Solutions helps businesses to understand and utilise their data, provides software training, report development and consultancy to its clients across the voluntary, private and public sectors.

How has the pandemic impacted your business and how have you adapted?

The business is split between training, consulting and reporting. All of our training is done face-to-face in a training room environment, so when the pandemic hit, it was the first side of the business to be impacted. Unfortunately, I lost 40-50% of my business straight away. Following that, many of my clients were impacted, which meant that I lost a further large amount of the business that was left.

I modified my website to explain that while I wasn’t able to offer the face-to-face training, I could still offer the report writing and consultancy services. Fortunately, I was able to secure a new client which made a huge difference to the survival of the business.

As a freelancer, I have always put money aside as a cushion as it can be unpredictable and uncertain at the best of times. This meant that there was enough money in the business to remain sustainable. Having that contingency was a lifeline.

What’s next for your business?

I’m hitting a huge milestone this year so it’s important to reflect on that. I think that it will be a matter of being patient this year to see what happens in the future. I am still planning to add additional software to my training offer, but I’m not looking too far ahead at this stage.

As well as having more time to reflect, I have also increased my voluntary work. I’ve re-engaged with the Princes Trust, am mentoring businesses and have joined the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority Race Equality Board. That has been a really positive outcome from the past year. While I’m experiencing a quieter time, it gives me more opportunity to use my experience to help others to achieve their business aspirations and share my experiences.

Do you feel positive about the future?

The business has been going for almost 20 years and I’m used to it running in peaks and troughs. As a freelancer it can change day to day – when I work, I work hard, and when it’s quiet I’m able to do other things. I don’t worry about where my next job is because that is the nature of my business.

I tend to take time off at the end of each year to make plans and reflect. This year, I’ve taken the decision that it will be a year of self-care and I will be focusing on my health, both mental and physical. There are too many unknown parameters that are out of my control at the moment, so it’s a good time to take my foot off the gas. I also know that it isn’t realistic to make long term plans, so I’m not planning further than three months ahead.

Kickstarting careers and helping businesses recover



Elaine Bowker,
*Principal and Chief
Executive at The City of
Liverpool College*

Never before has it been so important for businesses and educational providers to come together to boost employment prospects and bridge the skills gap, as we face the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Last year, to combat these challenges, the Government launched the Kickstart Scheme, which aims to help people who have lost their jobs to retrain and upskill in order to re-enter the workforce.

The announcement came as unemployment levels hit a three-year high. The headline UK unemployment rate increased to 4.5% in the three months leading up to August 2020 – representing 1.5 million people out of work – up from 4.1% in July.

What’s more, The Resolution Foundation has recently warned that youth unemployment could rise to around 17%, the same level as the early 1980s peak. We therefore urgently need to do more to help young people.

With Kickstart, the Government will subsidise new placement employees’ wages for up to six months, as well as awarding a £1,500 incentive payment to employers for each Kickstart employee taken on.

These work placements will give young people (16-24) – who are in receipt of Universal credit, with many working in sectors disproportionately hit by the pandemic – the opportunity to build their skills in the workplace and to gain experience to improve their chances of finding long-term work.

In short, the scheme is designed to help unemployed people gain experience and gives businesses the means to rebuild their workforce without causing financial hardship.

At The City of Liverpool College, we want to help businesses and young people access Kickstart. We know that some businesses can’t meet the minimum number of 30 placements on their own, so we’ve come up with a way to help.

By bringing together groups of small businesses looking to take on one or more Kickstart candidate, we will facilitate the recruitment and onboarding of new team members, taking away the logistics and overcoming the obstacle of minimum numbers.

We are working closely with all employers who sign up to develop and deliver a pre-employment training plan, ensuring that candidates joining you via the Kickstart scheme are equipped with the skills required by your business from day one. Following completion of the Kickstart programme, individuals will be perfectly placed to progress onto an Apprenticeship or full-time employment.

By working closely with the employers involved, we can ensure businesses attract and retain the individuals with the skills and expertise that are most relevant to them, ultimately helping organisations to thrive.

Kickstart has the potential to launch the careers of hundreds of thousands of young people. While the future youth labour market will undoubtedly be very different to what we are used to, if Kickstart can give young people the opportunities and skills to adapt and thrive, business and the economy will benefit from the unique talent, energy and creativity that young people bring.

Never before has it been so important for businesses and educational providers to come together to boost employment prospects and bridge the skills gap. Now is the time for us to join forces.

If you would like to find out how your business could benefit from partnering with The City of Liverpool College and take advantage of the Kickstart Scheme, contact workforceskills@liv-coll.ac.uk.



Buying a house needs a bespoke service



Tracey Quirk,
Partner and Head of Residential Conveyancing at MSB Solicitors

Has your vision of your ideal home changed since the pandemic started? You're not alone. According to research by Your Money, Covid-19 has brought about significant changes in the areas and types of properties people are looking to buy. Nearly a fifth (18%) of buyers are now planning to purchase homes in more rural areas than before the crisis, with another 17% intending to buy further away from their place of work.

While there's normally a seasonal slowdown in housing market activity over the summer months, the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent lockdown meant the market experienced a mini-boom as restrictions eased and people reassessed their priorities in life.

Not forgetting the stamp duty relief, which has given plenty of people the impetus to crack on and move. The stamp duty holiday, which lasts until the end of March, means it's obviously cheaper to move now rather than in a year's time – it could mean savings of up to £15,000 on properties worth up to £500,000 in England and Northern Ireland, and £250,000 in Wales and Scotland.

As a result, Rightmove reports it's been the busiest time for sales in 10 years, with home movers putting more property on the market and saying 'yes' to more sales.

Homes are also selling quickly. Property site Zoopla said in mid-August 2020, three-bedroom homes were selling in 24 days on average, which is 12 days faster than the same period last year.

Many people appear to be reprioritising where they live, with some recognising that if they can work from home for such long periods, they no longer need to live in crowded and expensive cities and can take advantage of a more laid-back lifestyle in or beyond the commuter belts or nearer national parks or the coast. Never before have our homes felt more important, providing us with a safe place during these uncertain times. So, taking the next step on the ladder can feel like a daunting decision.

Whichever route you're thinking of taking, this really is the moment to seek out professional advice if you're planning on stepping onto or up the housing ladder.

Property transactions can often be stressful, and the conveyancing process can seem somewhat bewildering and daunting to anyone who is unfamiliar with it. Your solicitor's job is to ensure that both your purchase and your sale is fully legal and that there are no nasty surprises for you – such as finding that your new property is on a short lease, or that your buyers are complaining that you misled or deceived them somehow.

That's why, at MSB, we work closely with our clients to guide them through the process and ensure a smooth and efficient transaction.

Our expert residential conveyancing team provides sector-leading services and advice, guiding our clients through the very best solutions for their ventures. It's often the biggest single transaction people will make, so it's important to get it right.

Every transaction is different, and the timescale can depend on a number of factors, such as the time taken to obtain mortgage offers, conveyancing searches, and if the lender has any special conditions in the mortgage offer which need to be dealt with. For this reason, we work with our clients on a case-by-case basis, taking the pressure off them to complete the transaction quickly and effectively.

It is our aim to guide you through the process and make it as trouble-free as possible by providing a high quality, bespoke, personal and friendly service dealing with any issues in a manner you can understand rather than legal jargon.

So, whether you're buying now to take advantage of the Stamp Duty holiday, or you're considering making a move, get in touch to find out how we can make the process a smooth one.

“Never before have our homes felt more important, providing us with a safe place during these uncertain times.”



Spotlight on...

Not in recent years has the nation collectively experienced the challenges to mental health and wellbeing brought about by the current pandemic.

Mental health in the workplace

With millions of UK workers forced to work from home due to the restrictions put in place by the Government, employers have faced many unique challenges that come with managing remote workforces.

Despite the unplanned nature of this transition, businesses adapted quickly to the change, with some indicators suggesting the transition was, initially at least, more successful than could have previously been anticipated.

However, emerging from a tumultuous year, research by Hiscox suggests that businesses are concerned about the toll 2020 has had on their workforce, where remote working, concerns about livelihoods, and juggling work and parenting has affected the majority of the UK.

This is in addition to the country's mental health "explosion" which, according to ONS data, saw people experiencing a form of depression double from March to June 2020, as the impact of the first national lockdown was felt.

Now that the aftershocks of lockdown, furlough and remote working will continue to be felt in the workplace, there is a need more than ever for those at the very top to shape and lead on mental wellbeing within their organisations.

We spoke to some of our city region's most influential leaders, about how they have supported their employees through the pandemic and just why taking care of our mental health is so important.



Asif Hamid, Chair of Liverpool's Local Enterprise Partnership

Asif says his business had to quickly adapt to the changes brought about by the pandemic: "Mental health and wellbeing is one of our driving factors. We deal in call centre environments so recognise that our teams need support, which we've always provided. Pre-pandemic, we had a number of initiatives already in place such as Wellbeing Champions for people to talk to, a helpline and an intranet with resources for people to access.

"In the first lockdown, we found that many people weren't able to work from home or simply worked better in an office environment, so we prioritised making this accessible, by securing the office and putting social distancing measures in place. We've now moved to a flexible working model, allowing people to work from home – investing in technology for them to do so – or to come into the office, depending on what works best for them. It has worked really well for us and is something we'll take forward, but it is very different for each business."

Paul Corcoran, CEO of Agent

Paul has always put a focus on the wellbeing of his team: "Mental health has been a major cornerstone at Agent for around 10 years, in terms of the initiatives we've had in place. We've always placed a focus on workplace wellbeing, with regular "keep in touch" meetings as well as mindfulness training, monthly massages, and yoga for people to take part in. They've been good ways of providing breaks and opportunities for people to step away and have a moment of calm.

"Our culture is also really important to us. We have a really open and honest environment which in turn means people are able to share their challenges. Over the years it's been amazing how much the business has been able to step in to support our team, in ways you might not expect.

It isn't just about adding to the list of corporate social responsibility initiatives, it's about doing what you can to support each other, in any way possible.

"In 2020, we offered more regular check ins as teams as we haven't been able to have that physical, face-to-face contact. My message to the senior leadership team has been to be really aware and look out for signs that someone might need additional support or might be struggling. We've had regular briefings with the team to make sure we're communicating as much as possible and have brought in Counsellors for those who wanted to talk to someone outside of the organisation. Sometimes you just need someone to listen, objectively."



Emma Degg, CEO of the North West Business Leadership Team (NWBLT)

Emma says mental health is now an essential part of every business: “Pre-pandemic, mental health was an issue that I was aware of and as a team, we talked about it from time to time. Now, taking care of ourselves and the people who work for us is an essential part of running any business. I don’t have a conversation with employees that doesn’t include at some point, just the question “how are you doing?”

“All good businesses are now seeing taking care of their employees’ mental health as a mandatory part of a manager’s job. Mental health is now the number one issue people are talking about, not just in terms of looking after people, but about keeping productivity and innovation high. As much as it’s about taking care of people, it’s also a business issue.”



Anne McColl, CEO of Blackburne House

For **Anne**, mental health has always been high on the agenda, but she has had to find ways to adapt: “As a women’s organisation, supporting mental health has been a constant focus for us as locally and nationally there are higher instances of women being affected. Pre-pandemic, we had a number of initiatives available to staff such as trained Mental Health First Aiders, offering yoga and wellness activities for staff, as well as a having a Counsellor available. We had also introduced ‘Wellbeing Wednesdays’, which offered guided mindfulness sessions before work and also encouraged group lunchtime walks to encourage staff and their connection to the outdoors.

“Since the pandemic struck, we have communicated our Covid-19 protocols and given staff clear guidance, so there are no unknowns, ensuring we could remove any anxiety when they were coming into work. We have also scaled up our offer to providing staff, learners and clients with regular wellness check-ins and weekly newsletters highlighting wellness techniques and to advertise our initiatives. We’ve also scaled up our counselling and wellness provision.

“We now have a team of Counsellors and Wellness Practitioners that offer 1-2-1 counselling, group sessions and wellness sessions. We also have Zoom ‘coffee and chats’ each week, so staff can dial in and see and speak to their friends and colleagues. This is not about work, it’s about that human connection.”



Kim Healey, Director of People, Culture and Workplace Wellbeing at Everton Football Club

Before the pandemic Kim had just begun implementing a new wellbeing strategy across the Club and its charity, Everton in the Community. **Kim** said: “We’re passionate about promoting positive mental health, and it is also a big focus for Everton in the Community – which is currently fundraising for The People’s Place, a new facility in L4 that will promote positive mental health and offer support to the public.

“In pre-Covid-19 scenario planning, we identified that supporting our people’s mental health would be more important than ever. We looked at the best way to deliver and adapt our strategy, and what we could prioritise – for example, we accelerated our plans to train and introduce staff Mental Health Ambassadors, and increased communication around free staff counselling and wellbeing and health benefits.

“Three of our staff networks – our Mental Health Network, Women’s Network and LGBTQ Network – were also in the early stages when lockdown began. They have really developed and helped us shape the support we offer. We’ve continued with our plans to grow our networks and recently launched a Disability network and a Race Equality Network.

“Since the pandemic, we have looked at new ways to communicate and introduced activities that give people opportunities to socialise and connect aside from the working day, as part of our staff-led Everton Connect initiative which began at the start of the first lockdown. We have offered yoga and exercise sessions, virtual lunchrooms, and home-schooling advice.”

The focus around mental health is mostly placed on the wellbeing of employees and what their employers are doing to support them, and rightly so. But it’s also important for business leaders to take care of their own mental health. This can often be a challenge. **Asif** said: “We often neglect the leaders in business because we assume they will be okay. It doesn’t matter whether you’re the CEO of a large corporation and employ thousands of people, or if you’re a mid-level manager – you’ve got to give the stability and support to everyone at all levels.

“You can get into a position where you log on at 7am and don’t look away from your screen until 7pm. It’s important to step away and take a break, whatever level you’re at. Personal contact as a leader is so important, so it’s an incredibly difficult transition for anyone, especially when you run a business that deals with people.”

Emma, added: “Yes looking after employees’ mental health is really important, but quite often business leaders forget to look after themselves and each other. We know that so much of our productivity is about leadership, so that’s a critical business issue, too.

“I’ve never in the past been very good at taking the time for self-care. Particularly during the most recent lockdown, it has become a necessity, not a nice to have. I’ve got a dog, so I make sure I get outside at least a couple of times a day to walk her and I’m much stricter about what I say yes to because it’s easy to be on a computer screen for 12 hours a day and not stand up. Now, things I’ve tried to do in the past, I’m quite religious about.

“Employees need to see their leaders walking the walk. If you’re not taking the time to look after your own mental health and wellbeing, then they won’t believe you when you say that you want them to act differently. We really are all in this together.”

Paul says he has been having more open and honest conversations with his peers than ever before: “Leadership fatigue is hard. Everyone comes to you for the answers and when you’re in the middle of the wilderness not knowing what’s going on, it can be really challenging.

“I’ve had more vulnerable conversations this year than probably ever before, both with people who have been in my network for a long time and those who are relatively new. Organisations like NWBLT have been a lifeline. Talking to other senior leaders about what they are going through and feeling like you’re in a safe space and you’re not alone has been really valuable.”

For **Kim**, she recognises that it’s okay not to be okay. She said: “I am a trained Counsellor, which has been invaluable to me in my role, and has given me a real understanding of why it is so important to talk to others. Understanding that it’s okay not to be okay helps me with me with my own wellbeing.

“For me, routine is very important, as is exercise. I do online gym sessions three mornings a week before work, and I also have a walking treadmill that I use – people have got used to me walking and talking at meetings!”

For some, working from home works, but for others, it can be incredibly challenging and adds a huge amount of stress. **Emma** said: “We have a group of brilliant women called our ‘Rising Stars’, who are the leaders of the future. Many of them are juggling senior jobs with home schooling and the overwhelming majority of caring responsibilities for their homes and families. Good employers are seeking to be as flexible as possible because there simply aren’t enough hours in the day for people to look after their mental health alongside those responsibilities. I’m very worried that we will see certain groups exiting the workforce because they simply – and quite understandably – can’t cope with those challenges.

“Everyone has different needs and are experiencing different challenges. We’re in the same storm but not necessarily in the same boat, and as a business community we need to be really serious about that. We aren’t so much working from home, as living at work at the moment. It’s a pressure for everyone. Flexible working with an element of working from home is certainly going to be part of the future, but in very different circumstances than those we’re in now.”

Blackburne House is an example of a business that has provided flexibility for its employees.

Anne said: “We ask our team members what they need and react accordingly. We offer flexible hours if parents are having to home school and we support with activity packs from our Nursery for staff and their children and offer mindfulness provision. The key is communication and actually listening to staff and what they need. We have increased levels of communications so we can all support each other.”

For **Paul**, working from home is a challenge for the creative industry: “We’re used to having noisy working sessions and sharing ideas, people coming into the office, learners coming in for Agent Academy. It’s an energetic place to be. We know that we can work from home, but building relationships, camaraderie and creativity is just different. That is the really important stuff, and it can’t be replicated over a Zoom call.”

Kim says that supporting team members during the transition back into the working environment will be really important: “We’ll be using what we have learned over the past year to inform the transition back to more site-based working, when that time comes.



“We understand that flexibility is the key, and we’ll be looking at how we support people’s mental wellbeing throughout that transition, as we understand that people will have different thoughts about returning. We will be engaging with staff about the return, acknowledging people’s different circumstances, and we will be ensuring everybody has a chance to have their say.

“Through this experience, I have learned just how resilient our people are, and how eager they are to help support each other and use their talents to promote wellbeing, which will help inform our wellbeing strategy going forward.”

When it comes to sharing advice with other business leaders around supporting the mental health and wellbeing of employees, **Asif** said: “It’s the little changes that make a big difference. Real leadership is about listening, as well as speaking. It’s so important to engage with your employees, as well as having conversations with other leaders. It’s a difficult time period, so it’s important to consider what you have done differently to make a difference to your business.

Kim agrees that listening to employees is incredibly important: “We spend seven hours a day or more at work, so it is vital that people are happy, and, even better, that they see their organisation as a family.

“In that same spirit of family, it is important to listen to your people, really find out what you can do as a business to support them, and create a culture of openness, where everyone knows where to go with any ideas, comments or concerns. It is also vital that you equip managers with the tools to support their staff, as they are often the first port of call.”

Anne added: “Protect time to focus on the wellbeing of your team, create safe spaces for people to share how they are feeling. Ask if the available support is helpful and if there is any additional support for you to consider. Be mindful to reach out to team members working remotely, particularly those who don’t engage or stay connected in this current environment, as they may be quietly finding this tough.”

For **Paul**, it comes down to trust. He said: “It needs to come from a place of trust, for both parties. It’s important to ask yourself: are you a trusted leader? Does your team trust you to make the right decisions and do the right thing by them? If yes, then have open and honest conversations, sensitively.

“If not, why not? Unpick and re-sew those relationships and be aware of the challenges everyone might be facing. This situation impacts everyone differently; people losing loved ones, new parents, childcare, being away from families. It’s so important to be sensitive to that and do everything in your power to support your team.”

Emma believes business leaders should practice what they preach. She said: “People are worried about the security of their jobs and their families. They’re worried if they’re not seen to be online all day every day, then that will in some way count against them.

As a result, we’ve seen a lot of presenteeism. Most managers will say that they don’t expect that and don’t value people according to time spent but if those managers and leaders are routinely putting in incredibly long hours, with emails flying in all of the time, then employees won’t believe them that it’s okay to look after themselves as well.

“We could write down what the tips are for working on your mental health, but it doesn’t mean anything if you don’t practice it and demonstrate it. We believe what we see other people do.

“This is a marathon and we’re going to be dealing with these issues for a long time to come. If we don’t take the time to make sure we’re all as fit as we possibly can be for when we can really row behind the recovery, then it’s not going to work. This isn’t just hanging on until it stops. We’ve got to make sure we’re match fit.” ■



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