businesscompanion
trading standards law explained

Company and business names

In the guide

Who do the business names provisions apply to?
Sole traders and partnerships
- Business names display

Companies
- Rules on company names
- Displaying company information

Limited liability partnerships
- Rules on names of LLPs
- Displaying LLP information

Other requirements
- Trading names and trade marks
- Distance sales

Trading Standards
In this update
Key legislation

In this guide, the words 'must' or 'must not' are used where there is a legal requirement to do (or not do) something. The word 'should' is used where there is established legal guidance or best practice that is likely to help you avoid breaking the law.

This guidance is for England, Scotland and Wales

Requirements for the use, display and disclosure of company, business and trading names are detailed in four pieces of legislation:

- Companies Act 2006
- Limited Liability Partnerships (Application of Companies Act 2006) Regulations 2009
- Company, Limited Liability Partnership and Business Names (Sensitive Words and Expressions) Regulations 2014
- Company, Limited Liability Partnership and Business (Names and Trading Disclosures) Regulations 2015

There are requirements relating to the name that a business chooses to trade under and rules to prevent the use of names that could mislead the public.

Who do the business names provisions apply to?

This legislation gives detailed requirements regarding names that businesses can choose to trade under and how particular details about businesses have to be disclosed to their customers. The provisions apply to:

- Individuals who trade under a name that is not their own
- Partnerships that do not operate under the names of the individual partners
- Companies / limited liability partnerships

Sole traders and partnerships

Sole traders and partnerships that are not registered companies are required to display and disclose detailed information about their businesses when they use a business name that is not their surname (with or without forenames or initials) or one that does not use the names of all the partners.

For example, if John Smith has a shop called Happy Family Bakers, the disclosure requirements would apply to him; were he to call his business Mr Smith, John Smith, or J Smith, they would not. The same would apply to a partnership. If John Smith and Sarah Jones have a business partnership called Happy Bakers, the disclosure requirements would apply; were they to call their business J Smith and S Jones, or Smith and Jones, they would not.

As well as the above, the disclosure requirements do not apply when a business is continuing the trade of a former owner, and the new name includes both the former and current owners - for example, 'Mr Smith (formerly Ms Jones)'.

Business names display

Where a sole trader or partnership carries on business under a name that is not that of the proprietor or partners their details must be fully disclosed to customers and suppliers in order to make it clear who they are doing business with.

The following information is required to be disclosed:

- Full name of the proprietor or all of the partners
- An address at which the business can be contacted and have legal documents formally served on it

The required information must be:

- Displayed in a prominent position in all business premises where customers and suppliers have access
- Included legibly on all business documents:
    - Letters
    - Written orders for goods or services
    - Invoices and receipts
    - Written demands for payment
    - Business websites (a requirement under the Electronic Commerce (EC Directive) Regulations 2002)
- Given immediately in writing to any customer or supplier who requests business details information

Partnerships of more than 20 persons are not required to disclose details all of the partners in business

documents if:

- A list of the names of all the partners is maintained at the principal place of business
- None of the partner's names appear in documents except in the text or as a signatory
- Documents state legibly the address of the partnership's principal place of business and that the list of the partners' names is open to inspection there
- The list of the partners' names is available for inspection during office hours

Below is an example of a notice that could be displayed to comply with the business premises requirements for a sole trader. Partnerships need to include the full names of all of the partners in such a notice.

PARTICULARS OF OWNERSHIP OF
Happy Family Bakery
as required by section 1204 of the Companies Act 2006

Full name of owner:
John Smith

Address at which documents relating to the business may effectively be served:
The Cottage Bakery
10 Cobb Street
Bath
BA23 3UN

Companies

The following requirements apply only to companies that are registered with Companies House.

Rules on company names

There are specific rules in the legislation concerning company incorporation and names that can be used and registered with Companies House, full guidance on which can be found on the GOV.UK website.

Briefly, the rules concerning company names include:

- Having a maximum of 160 characters
- Not being the same as, or 'too like' a current registered company
- Not infringing registered trade marks
- Not being a name that is intended to facilitate the commission of an offence involving dishonesty or deception (fraud, in other words)
- Not being a name that could give the false impression that the company is connected with a foreign government or certain international organisations
- Containing only permitted characters, punctuation, abbreviations, signs and symbols
- Not consisting of or including computer code
- Not using words or expressions that are banned or need approval from the Secretary of State, such as:
    - 'Association'
    - 'Royal'
    - 'English'
    - 'Council'

Displaying company information

Registered name

Active companies must display their full registered company name at:

- Their registered office
- All other locations at which they carry on business except those used primarily for living accommodation
- An inspection place at which required company records are kept available for inspection

This requirement does not apply to companies where the residential address of every individual director cannot be disclosed by the Registrar of Companies to a credit reference agency. In this situation, the company does not have to display its registered name at any location apart from the company's registered office or an inspection place for the company's records.

Manner of display

Where business premises are shared by up to five companies, the registered name must be:

- Easily seen by visitors
- Continuously displayed

Where business premises are shared by six or more companies, each company must ensure that their registered name is either:

- Displayed for at least fifteen continuous seconds at least once every three minutes
  or
- Available for inspection by visitors

Registered name to appear in communications

Companies must disclose their registered name on:

- Business letters
- Business emails
- Notices
- Official publications
- Websites
- Bills of exchange
- Promissory notes
- Endorsements
- Order forms
- Cheques signed by or on behalf of the company
- Orders for money, goods or services signed by or on behalf of the company
- Bills of parcels
- Invoices
- Demands for payment
- Receipts
- Letters of credit
- Applications for licences to carry on a trade or activity
- All other forms of their business correspondence and documentation

Further particulars to be disclosed

Companies must disclose the following particulars on their business letters, order forms and websites:

- The part of the United Kingdom in which the company is registered
- The company's registered number
- The address of the company's registered office
- That they are a limited company (for companies exempt from the obligation to use the word 'limited', and for community interest companies that are not public companies)
- That they are an investment company (where appropriate)

If companies disclose the amount of share capital in those places, the disclosure must be as to paid-up share capital.

Disclosure of names of directors

Where a company's business letters include the names of any individual or corporate director of the company, other than in the text or as a signatory, the letter must disclose the names of every director of the company.

Requests for company information

Within five working days of receiving a written request for company information from anyone it deals with in the course of business, companies must send a written reply disclosing:

- Their registered office address
- Location of any inspection place
- Type of company records that are kept at that those places

Registered email address

Companies must have a registered email address. This must be an 'appropriate address' where emails sent to it by the Registrar of Companies would be expected to come to the attention of a person acting on behalf of the company.

Legibility of displays and disclosures

All information that is required to be displayed or disclosed must be clearly legible.

Limited liability partnerships

The requirements for limited liability partnerships (LLPs) are similar to those for companies.

Two or more individuals or companies can set up (incorporate) as an LLP to operate a business. An LLP has a separate legal personality and its members are not personally liable for the debts of the business.

Rules on names of LLPs

There are specific rules in the legislation concerning LLP incorporation and names that can be used and registered with Companies House, full guidance on which can be found on the GOV.UK website.

Briefly, the rules concerning LLP names include the following:

- Must end with 'limited liability partnership', 'llp' or 'LLP' (if the registered office is situated in Wales, the name must end with 'limited liability partnership' and 'partneriaeth atebolrwydd cyfyngedig', or one of 'llp', 'LLP', 'pac' and 'PAC')
- Having a maximum of 160 characters
- Not being the same as, or 'too like', an existing LLP
- Not infringing registered trade marks
- Not being a name that is intended to facilitate the commission of an offence involving dishonesty or deception (fraud, in other words)
- Not being a name that could give the false impression that the company is connected with a foreign government or certain international organisations
- Containing only permitted characters, punctuation, abbreviations, signs and symbols
- Not consisting of or including computer code
- Not using words or expressions that are banned or need approval from the Secretary of State, such as:
    - 'Association'
    - 'Royal'
    - 'English'
    - 'Council'

Displaying LLP information

Registered name

Every active LLP must display its full registered name at:

- Its registered office
- All other locations at which it carries on business except those used primarily for living accommodation
- An inspection place at which required LLP records are kept available for inspection

If the residential addresses of every member of the LLP cannot be disclosed by the Registrar of Companies to a credit reference agency, then the LLP does not have to display its registered name at any location apart from the LLP's registered office or an inspection place for the LLP's records.

Manner of display

Where business premises are shared by up to five LLPs, the registered name must be:

- Easily seen by visitors
- Continuously displayed

Where business premises are shared by six or more LLPs, each LLP must ensure that their registered name is either:

- Displayed for at least fifteen continuous seconds at least once every three minutes
  or
- Available for inspection by visitors

Registered name to appear in communications

LLPs must disclose their registered name on:

- Business letters
- Business emails
- Notices
- Official publications
- Websites
- Bills of exchange
- Promissory notes
- Endorsements
- Order forms
- Cheques signed by or on behalf of the LLP
- Orders for money, goods or services signed by or on behalf of the LLP
- Bills of parcels
- Invoices
- Demands for payment
- Receipts
- Letters of credit
- Applications for licences to carry on a trade or activity
- All other forms of their business correspondence and documentation

Further particulars to be disclosed

LLPs must disclose the following particulars on their business letters, order forms and websites:

- The part of the United Kingdom in which the LLP is registered
- The LLP's registered number
- The address of the LLP's registered office
- Where the LLP name ends with the abbreviation LLP, llp, or the Welsh equivalent, the fact that it is a limited liability partnership or the Welsh equivalent

Registered email address

LLPs must have a registered email address. This must be an 'appropriate address' where emails sent to it by the Registrar of Companies would be expected to come to the attention of a person acting on behalf of the company.

Disclosure of members' names

Where an LLP's business letters include the names of any member of the LLP, other than in the text or as a signatory, the letter must disclose all the members' names. If the LLP has more than 20 members, it need not show the members' names as long as it keeps a list of all the members' names at its principal place of business, and the document states that the list is available for inspection.

Requests for information

Within five working days of receiving a written request for information about the LLP from anyone it deals with in the course of business, the LLP must send a written reply disclosing:

- Its registered office address
- The address of any inspection place
- The type of LLP records that are kept at that those places

Legibility of displays and disclosures

All information that is required to be displayed or disclosed must be clearly legible.

Other requirements

The following applies equally to sole traders, partnerships, companies and LLPs.

Trading names and trade marks

Whether you have a business, partnership or company, you may well wish to trade under a different name. If you do, you need to be aware that you cannot use another company's trade mark as your business name. You can search the trade mark register on the GOV.UK website to find out if a mark is already registered.

If someone else begins to trade using your trade name or your unregistered trade mark you may have to take an action for 'passing off' in the civil courts to stop them. Therefore, you may wish to register your trade name or unregistered trade mark for enhanced protection.

To be registered, trade marks must comply with the rules relating to trade mark registration and certain names or marks are not eligible for registration - for example, marks that include common trade terms, such as A1 Taxis, A1 Cleaners, etc. However, this does not prevent anyone carrying on a business under those names. To register a trade mark you can apply online to the Intellectual Property Office (IPO).

See 'Intellectual property' for more information on trade marks.

Distance sales

Also applicable to any business that trades through advertisements or online are the Consumer Contracts (Information, Cancellation and Additional Charges) Regulations 2013. These Regulations require a supplier to provide a prospective buyer with details about themselves. Before a consumer concludes an online transaction or responds to an advert etc the supplier must provide details of the postal address of their business, so that a consumer may address complaints in a durable written format.

The Electronic Commerce (EC Directive) Regulations 2002 require businesses selling or advertising online to provide certain information on their website, some of which overlaps with the above requirements, such as the company or business name, a UK geographic address and detailed information on pricing, delivery charges, etc.

See 'Consumer contracts: distance sales' for more information.

Trading Standards

For more information on the work of Trading Standards services - and the possible consequences of not abiding by the law - please see 'Trading Standards: powers, enforcement and penalties'.

In this update

No major changes.

Last reviewed / updated: May 2026

Key legislation

- Insolvency Act 1986
- Trade Marks Act 1994
- Electronic Commerce (EC Directive) Regulations 2002
- Companies Act 2006
- Limited Liability Partnerships (Application of Companies Act 2006) Regulations 2009
- Consumer Contracts (Information, Cancellation and Additional Charges) Regulations 2013
- Company, Limited Liability Partnership and Business Names (Sensitive Words and Expressions) Regulations 2014
- Company, Limited Liability Partnership and Business (Names and Trading Disclosures) Regulations 2015

Please note

This information is intended for guidance; only the courts can give an authoritative interpretation of the law.

The guide's 'Key legislation' links go to the legislation.gov.uk website. The site usually updates the legislation to include any amendments made to it. However, this is not always the case. Information on all changes made to legislation can be found by following the above links and clicking on the 'More Resources' tab.

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