BANK SOLUTIONS REPORT · SEPTEMBER 2026

The real cost of 'free' business banking

Fourteen of the 31 UK business account plans in the Bank Solutions dataset publish no monthly fee; priced against three stated monthly usage patterns, the ones that can be priced cost between £0 and £649.20 a year, and cash handling rather than the monthly fee is the component that separates them.

By **Sam Allcock** · Published 5 September 2026 · Data as of 2026-09-05 ·

KEY FINDINGS

1. 14 of the 31 plans (11 bank accounts and 3 e-money accounts) publish a £0 ongoing monthly fee, a different thing from the 11 plans that publish an introductory free period; only the two NatWest plans appear in both groups.
2. For a digital sole trader making 15 payments out and 10 in a month, the ten £0 plans that can be priced cost between £0 and £105 a year - seven of the ten cost £0, so the median is £0 - while the 16 fee-charging plans cost between £102 and £839.88.
3. For a shop paying in £2,000 of cash over eight deposits and four cheques a month, the seven £0 plans that can be priced cost £96 to £649.20 a year (median £432) against £274.80 to £1,113.48 (median £602.40) for the nine fee-charging plans, and the two NatWest £0 plans cost more than eight of those nine.
4. Cash deposits are the largest component of the shop's yearly cost on 13 of the 16 plans priced, and the whole of it on three £0 plans: The Co-operative Bank FSB account (£96), Starling Bank (£288) and Virgin Money M Account for Business (£307.20).
5. For a small company sending two £2,000 international payments a month, only four of the 14 £0 plans publish every fee needed to price them (£240 to £546 a year, international charges the largest part of each), against nine fee-charging plans at £512.40 to £1,267.20 (median £736.68).

“No monthly fee” is the most-read line on a business account tariff and, for 14 of the 31 UK plans in the Bank Solutions dataset, it is accurate. It is also the only line the phrase describes. The same tariffs price payments out, payments in, cash paid over a counter and cheques paid in, and a plan that charges nothing a month can charge for all four. This report prices the 14 £0 plans against three stated monthly usage patterns - a digital sole trader, a shop taking cash and a small company trading abroad - using only the providers’ own published tariffs, read on 5 September 2026. Where a plan does not publish a fee for something a pattern would incur, it is excluded rather than estimated.

1. What “no monthly fee” means on a tariff

Every one of the 31 plans publishes a monthly fee - none is recorded as “not published” - and 14 publish it as £0. The other 17 charge one: two at under £8, nine between £8 and £12.99 and six at £13 or more, the highest £69.99. The median across all 31 is £7; among the 17 that charge, £10.

The 14 at £0 are HSBC Small Business Banking Account, NatWest Start-up Business Account, NatWest Business Current Account, The Co-operative Bank Business Bank Account, The Co-operative Bank Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) account, Virgin Money M Account for Business, Starling Bank Business Current Account, Monzo Business Lite, Zempler Bank Business Go, Mettle, Allica Bank Business Rewards Account, Tide Free, ANNA Money Free and Wise Business: 11 bank accounts and three e-money accounts. Each is a standing tariff line, not an offer.

A £0 ongoing fee is a different thing from a free period. Eleven plans publish a free period of 1, 12, 24, 25 or 30 months (median 12), after which the standard tariff applies, and nine of the 11 then charge between £6.50 and £22.90 a month. Only the two NatWest plans sit in both groups: a 24-month free period on a tariff with no monthly charge anyway. The other 12 £0 plans have no free period; the other nine free-period plans are not £0 plans. Free-period plans appear below as the fee-charging comparison group at their standard rates, with the year-one figure alongside.

2. Where the money goes instead

Per-payment fees. Twenty-six of the 31 plans publish a fee for a UK electronic payment out; 14 publish it as free, and where a fee is charged the median is £0.32 and the highest £0.35. Among the 14 £0 plans, eight publish free UK payments. Four charge: NatWest “£0.35 per item” for “Automated payments (in or out)”; Zempler Business Go “3 free a month (35p after)”; Tide Free 20p once its five included transfers a month are used. Two - Mettle and Wise Business - publish no UK per-payment fee at all. NatWest’s charge applies to money arriving as well as leaving (“Any automated payment in or out of your account”), so a customer paying an invoice costs the account holder 35p.

Allowance models. Eight plans include a set number of transactions a month before a per-item fee starts (the calculator's `included_transactions_per_month`): Zempler Business Go 3, Tide Free 5, ANNA Grow 15, Zempler Business Extra 20, Tide Smart 30, ANNA Business 60, Allica 150 and Zempler Business Pro 500. Three are £0 plans; Allica's page reads "Faster Payments are free for up to 150 transactions per month, after which a £0.12 fee applies per payment". Metro Bank's 30 free transactions are not recorded as an allowance because they are conditional on balance (section 6).

Cash. Twenty-five plans publish cash-deposit terms; six - Allica, the four ANNA plans and Wise - publish none. For £1,000 a month over four deposits the published terms produce a monthly cost of £0 to £21, median £10. The pricing takes three shapes: per £100 of value (The Co-operative Bank Business Bank Account "£1.50 per £100"; NatWest "£0.95 per £100" plus "£0.95 per item"; Virgin Money M Account "£0.90 per £100" plus "£0.95 per credit"), a percentage (HSBC "1.50% of the value deposited" plus "£1.50 per credit"; Starling "0.7% fee (minimum £3 fee)"; Zempler "£4 minimum fee or 0.55% fee") or a flat fee per deposit (Monzo "£1 per deposit"; Mettle "£2.75 per deposit"; Tide "£2.50 for deposits up to £500"). One £0 plan has an allowance - the FSB account's "Up to £1,000 per charging period - Free", then "80p per £100" - and on the £1,000 measure it is the only £0 plan at £0; the others with cash terms run from £4 a month (Monzo Lite) to £21 (HSBC).

Cheques. A cheque paid in costs 50p at HSBC and 75p at NatWest (both via the app), £1.50 at The Co-operative Bank Business Bank Account and, at Tide, "70p per cheque, plus a 20p standard transaction fee". It is free on the FSB account, at Starling ("via freepost or in the app") and on the M Account ("£0.00 via App; £0.55 via Branch"). Zempler does not take cheques ("Deposit cheques: No"); Monzo's Fee Information lists no cheque fee; Mettle, Allica, ANNA and Wise do not mention them.

3. The digital sole trader

The first pattern is 15 electronic payments out and 10 in a month, with no cash, cheques or international payments. Twenty-six plans can be priced; across them the ongoing yearly cost has a median of £113.94, a low of £0 and a high of £839.88. Ten of the 14 £0 plans are among the 26.

£0 PLAN	YEAR 1	ONGOING / YEAR	MADE UP OF
HSBC · Small Business Banking Account	£0	£0	Monthly fee £0, payments out £0
The Co-operative Bank · Business Bank Account	£0	£0	Monthly fee £0, payments out £0
The Co-operative Bank · FSB account	£0	£0	Monthly fee £0, payments out £0

£0 PLAN	YEAR 1	ONGOING / YEAR	MADE UP OF
Virgin Money · M Account for Business	£0	£0	Monthly fee £0, payments out £0
Starling Bank · Business Current Account	£0	£0	Monthly fee £0, payments out £0
Monzo Business · Lite	£0	£0	Monthly fee £0, payments out £0
Allica Bank · Business Rewards Account	£0	£0	Monthly fee £0, payments out £0
Zempler Bank · Business Go	£50.40	£50.40	Payments out £50.40
NatWest · Start-up Business Account	£0	£105	Payments out £63, payments in £42
NatWest · Business Current Account	£0	£105	Payments out £63, payments in £42

Seven of the ten rows are £0; sorted, the fifth and sixth values are both £0, so the median of the £0 group is £0, and the range is £0 to £105. Zempler's £50.40 is entirely payments out ("3 free a month (35p after)"); NatWest's £105 is split between payments out and in, and its year-one column is £0 because of the 24-month free period.

Four £0 plans are missing because a fee this pattern would incur is not published: Tide Free, whose allowance covers "Send and receive UK bank transfers" without separating the two; Mettle; ANNA Free, which prices incoming money by value ("Receive up to £1,000 incoming payments free each month, 0.95% commission after that"); and Wise Business. Tide Smart is the fifth exclusion, for Tide Free's reason.

FEE-CHARGING PLAN	ONGOING / YEAR	OF WHICH MONTHLY FEE
Barclays · Business Account	£102	£102
Monzo Business · Pro	£108	£108
Zempler Bank · Business Extra	£108	£108
Santander · Business Current Account - Classic	£119.88	£119.88
HSBC · Business Banking Account	£120	£120
Lloyds · Business Account	£120	£120
The Co-operative Bank · Business Directplus	£147	£84
Virgin Money · Business Current Account	£168	£78

FEE-CHARGING PLAN	ONGOING / YEAR	OF WHICH MONTHLY FEE
Metro Bank · Business Bank Account	£186	£96
ANNA Money · Grow	£187.20	£154.80
Zempler Bank · Business Pro	£228	£228
ANNA Money · Business	£298.80	£274.80
Monzo Business · Team	£300	£300
Tide · Pro	£329.88	£329.88
ANNA Money · Big Business	£718.80	£718.80
Tide · Max	£839.88	£839.88

The fee-charging range is £102 to £839.88; the two middle rows are Virgin Money Business Current Account at £168 and Metro Bank at £186. For 11 of the 16 the whole yearly cost is the monthly fee - this pattern triggers nothing else. The lowest, Barclays at £102, sits just below the two NatWest £0 plans at £105, the only place the two groups touch.

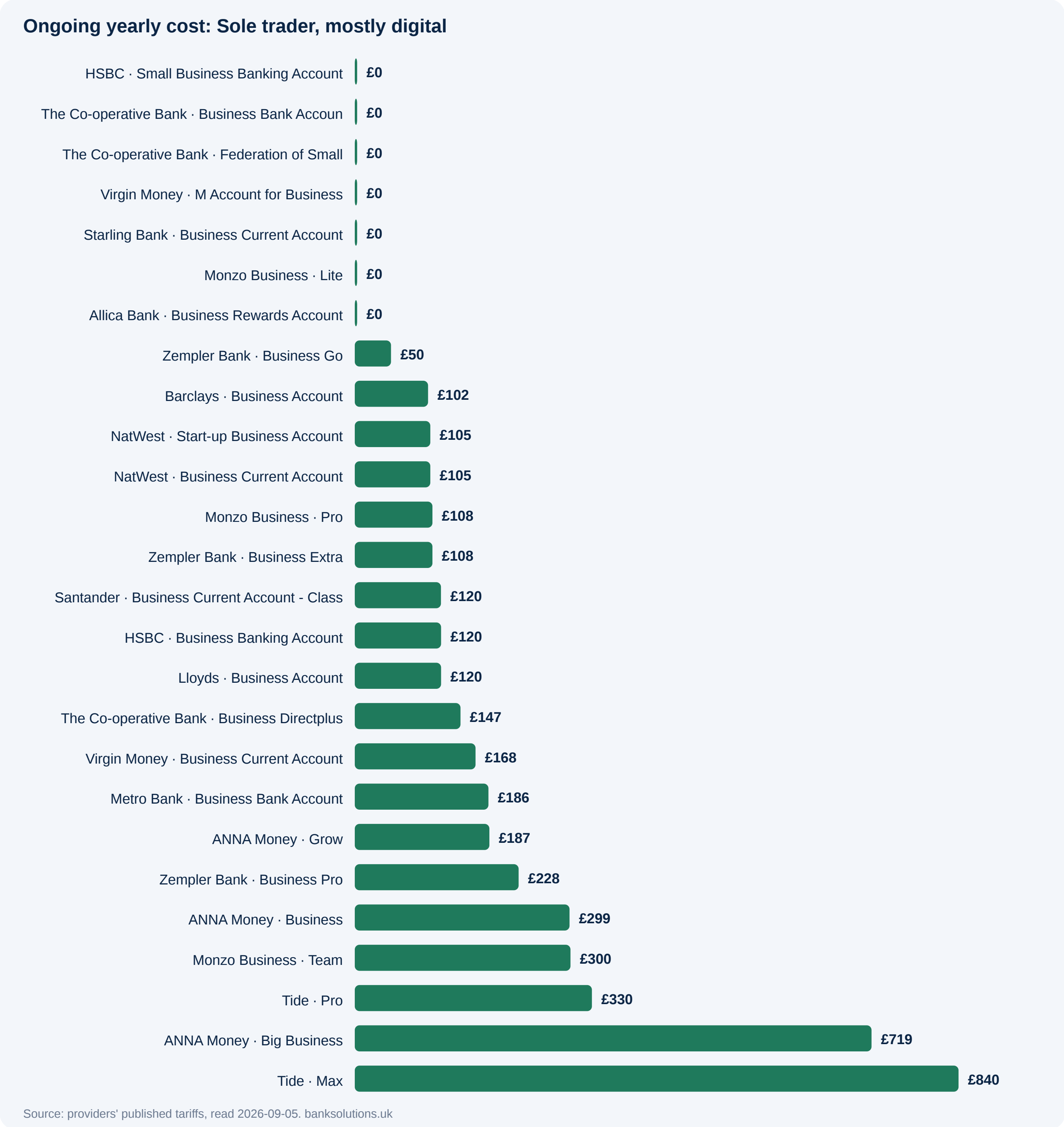

Figure 1. Ongoing yearly cost, sole trader pattern (15 payments out, 10 in, no cash or cheques), all 26 plans that can be priced. The chart rounds to the pound; the tables give values to the penny. Source: providers' published tariffs, read 5 September 2026.

4. The shop taking cash

The second pattern is 40 payments out and 30 in, £2,000 of cash over eight deposits and four cheques a month. Sixteen plans can be priced and 15 are excluded; across the 16 the ongoing yearly cost has a median of £547.80, a low of £96 and a high of £1,113.48. Seven of the 14 £0 plans are among them.

£0 PLAN	YEAR 1	ONGOING / YEAR	MADE UP OF
The Co-operative Bank · FSB account	£96	£96	Cash deposits £96
Starling Bank · Business Current Account	£288	£288	Cash deposits £288
Virgin Money · M Account for Business	£307.20	£307.20	Cash deposits £307.20
The Co-operative Bank · Business Bank Account	£432	£432	Cash deposits £360, cheques £72
HSBC · Small Business Banking Account	£528	£528	Cash deposits £504, cheques £24
NatWest · Start-up Business Account	£0	£649.20	Payments out £168, payments in £126, cash deposits £319.20, cheques £36
NatWest · Business Current Account	£0	£649.20	Payments out £168, payments in £126, cash deposits £319.20, cheques £36

The range is £96 to £649.20 and the middle row of seven, the median, is The Co-operative Bank Business Bank Account at £432. Cash is the whole cost on the first three rows and the largest part on the other four. The FSB account's £96 is the effect of its £1,000 allowance - only the cash above it is charged, at 80p per £100. Starling's £288 reflects "a £3 or 0.7% charge (whichever is higher)" per deposit. The NatWest rows are the highest in the £0 group because they alone charge on all four lines.

Seven £0 plans cannot be priced: Monzo Lite (no cheque fee published), Zempler Business Go (cheques not accepted), Tide Free (incoming payments), Mettle (UK payments), and Allica, ANNA Free and Wise (no cash or cheque terms). The £0 group is at half strength for exactly the kind of business the headline is aimed at.

FEE-CHARGING PLAN	YEAR 1	ONGOING / YEAR	MADE UP OF
Barclays · Business Account	£172.80	£274.80	Monthly fee £102, cash deposits £144, cheques £28.80
Santander · Business Current Account - Classic	£183.60	£303.48	Monthly fee £119.88, cash deposits £150, cheques £33.60
The Co-operative Bank · Business Directplus	£96	£384	Monthly fee £84, payments out £168, cash deposits £96, cheques £36

FEE-CHARGING PLAN	YEAR 1	ONGOING / YEAR	MADE UP OF
Virgin Money · Business Current Account	£0	£567.60	Monthly fee £78, payments out £144, payments in £108, cash deposits £223.20, cheques £14.40
Metro Bank · Business Bank Account	£240	£602.40	Monthly fee £96, payments out £144, payments in £108, cash deposits £240, cheques £14.40
Tide · Pro	£603.48	£603.48	Monthly fee £329.88, cash deposits £240, cheques £33.60
Lloyds · Business Account	£506.40	£626.40	Monthly fee £120, cash deposits £465.60, cheques £40.80
HSBC · Business Banking Account	£0	£648	Monthly fee £120, cash deposits £504, cheques £24
Tide · Max	£1,113.48	£1,113.48	Monthly fee £839.88, cash deposits £240, cheques £33.60

The fee-charging range is £274.80 to £1,113.48, with Metro Bank's £602.40 the middle row of nine. Read against the £0 table, the two NatWest plans at £649.20 cost more than eight of the nine fee-charging plans, and HSBC's £0 account at £528 more than three of them. Across all 16 rows, cash deposits are the largest single component on 13; the exceptions are Business Directplus, where payments out (£168) exceed cash (£96), and the two Tide plans, where the monthly fee is largest.

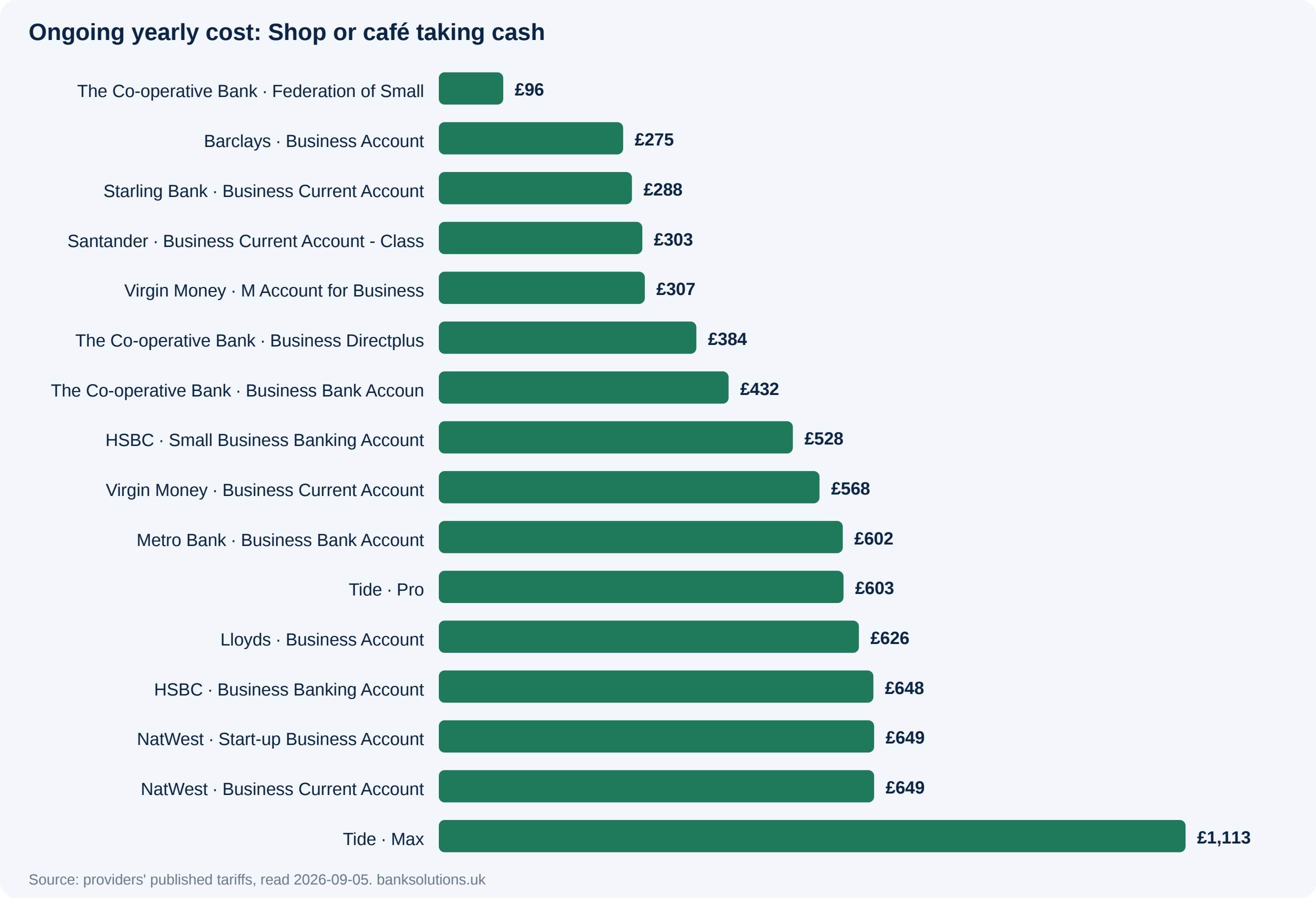

Figure 2. Ongoing yearly cost, shop pattern (40 payments out, 30 in, £2,000 cash in eight deposits, four cheques), all 16 plans that can be priced. The chart rounds to the pound. Source: providers' published tariffs, read 5 September 2026.

5. The small company trading abroad

The third pattern is 80 payments out and 60 in, £500 of cash in two deposits, two cheques and two international payments of £2,000 a month. Thirteen plans can be priced and 18 are excluded; the 13 have a median of £666, a low of £240 and a high of £1,267.20.

PLAN	FEE STATUS	YEAR 1	ONGOING / YEAR	MADE UP OF
The Co-operative Bank · FSB account	£0	£240	£240	International payments £240
The Co-operative Bank · Business Bank Account	£0	£366	£366	Cash deposits £90, cheques £36, international £240
Virgin Money · M Account for Business	£0	£496.80	£496.80	Cash deposits £76.80, international £420

PLAN	FEE STATUS	YEAR 1	ONGOING / YEAR	MADE UP OF
HSBC · Small Business Banking Account	£0	£546	£546	Cash deposits £126, cheques £12, international £408
Barclays · Business Account	Fee	£410.40	£512.40	Monthly fee £102, cash deposits £36, cheques £14.40, international £360
Lloyds · Business Account	Fee	£496.80	£616.80	Monthly fee £120, cash deposits £116.40, cheques £20.40, international £360
HSBC · Business Banking Account	Fee	£408	£666	Monthly fee £120, cash deposits £126, cheques £12, international £408
The Co-operative Bank · Business Directplus	Fee	£240	£678	Monthly fee £84, payments out £336, cheques £18, international £240
Santander · Business Current Account - Classic	Fee	£616.80	£736.68	Monthly fee £119.88, cheques £16.80, international £600
Tide · Pro	Fee	£886.68	£886.68	Monthly fee £329.88, cash deposits £60, cheques £16.80, international £480
Tide · Max	Fee	£1,228.68	£1,228.68	Monthly fee £839.88, cash deposits £60, cheques £16.80, international £312
Virgin Money · Business Current Account	Fee	£600	£1,245	Monthly fee £78, payments out £288, payments in £216, cash deposits £55.80, cheques £7.20, international £600
Metro Bank · Business Bank Account	Fee	£660	£1,267.20	Monthly fee £96, payments out £288, payments in £216, cash deposits £60, cheques £7.20, international £600

Four £0 plans can be priced, at £240 to £546; the two middle rows are £366 and £496.80. The nine fee-charging plans run from £512.40 to £1,267.20, with Santander's £736.68 the middle row. International payments are the largest component on 11 of the 13 rows, including all four £0 rows, and the line follows each tariff's per-payment fee: £10 "via online banking" at The Co-operative Bank (£240 on all three of its plans), £15 at Barclays and Lloyds (£360), £17 at HSBC (£408), "£17.50 via Business Internet Banking" on Virgin Money's M Account (£420), £25 at Santander, Virgin Money's Business Current Account and Metro Bank (£600), and at Tide a flat fee plus FX - "£5 + 0.75% FX fee" on Pro (£480), "£3 + 0.50% FX fee" on Max (£312).

Three rows show £0 for cash despite £500 a month being paid in: the FSB account and Business Directplus, whose £1,000 allowance covers it, and Santander, whose Key Facts Document allows “up to £1,000 in cash at Santander cash machines without charge” but charges “£1.25 for every £100 … for cash paid in over Santander counters and at Post Office counters” - the £0 assumes the machines.

Ten £0 plans cannot be priced here. NatWest’s leaflet carries no international fees (“please refer to our website or talk to your Relationship Manager”); Starling gives no per-payment figure; Monzo publishes a range (“no more than £9” plus “between 0% and 1.80%”); Zempler says “See your app or Online Banking for fees”; Allica routes payments through Wise (“Wise transfer fee and exchange rate applies. No Allica Bank fees”); ANNA Free states a 1% conversion fee but no per-payment charge; Tide Free, Mettle and Wise fall out for the reasons already given.

6. Conditions attached to “free”

Several £0 headlines carry a condition printed next to them, and the tables above apply the headline, not the condition.

Allica Bank. The fees page reads “Monthly fees: None*” with the footnote “* Customers whose balance falls below an average of £10,000 in the previous month will incur a £25 monthly fee. This does not apply to customers who hold an active loan product (including an overdraft) with Allica Bank.” The dataset records the £0 headline; a business holding an average balance under £10,000 would add the £25. The account is also gated: the product page is for businesses “up and running for at least 12 months who are able to deposit £50,000 or more”.

Metro Bank runs the same condition the other way. Its £8 fee applies “in a month where your balance falls below £6,000” and is “FREE (in a month where your balance remains at £6,000 or above)”, when “up to 30 in total” transactions are also free. It is recorded as a fee-charging plan at £8 because that is the standard rate.

Tide. The pricing page’s footnote reads, literally, “*We charge 0.20p for each bank transfer.” - a fifth of a penny. The dataset records it as 20p, “consistent with the cheque line ‘plus a 20p standard transaction fee’,” and flags that “editorial confirmation with Tide recommended.” A second footnote,* “We charge 0.20p for each direct debit payment.”, is not modelled.

NatWest. “No monthly charge” sits alongside “£0.35 per item” both ways, and for accounts opened on or after 20 April 2026, “if your cash deposits into your account exceed £200,000 in any 12-month period, you’ll no longer qualify for free banking”.

Eligibility and e-money terms. The FSB account is “Only for members of the Federation of Small Businesses”; Starling’s account is for a “Limited Company or limited liability partnership (LLP) registered at Companies House”, not sole traders; Virgin Money’s M Account is “for businesses with an annual turnover under £1m”. HSBC’s price list says “From 1 July 2025, we stopped offering a free banking period on primary Small Business Banking Accounts” - that £0 is the standard tariff, not an offer. ANNA Free charges “0.95% commission” on incoming payments above £1,000 a month; Wise Business charges “50 GBP” one-off for “Getting account details to receive in 22 currencies”.

Unpublished is not free. Mettle and Wise are marked not computable because neither publishes a UK electronic payment fee or an explicit £0 for one. Of the other 12 £0 plans, ten can be priced for the sole trader, seven for the shop and four for the small company. A plan that cannot be priced is not free; it is unpriced.

7. Method and limits

The three patterns. Sole trader: 15 electronic payments out and 10 in a month, no cash, cheques or international payments. Shop: 40 out and 30 in, £2,000 of cash over eight deposits, four cheques. Small company: 80 out and 60 in, £500 of cash over two deposits, two cheques, two international payments of £2,000. Ongoing cost is a year at the standard tariff; year one applies any published free period.

Published-only. Every figure comes from the provider’s own tariff, fee information document, key facts document or pricing page named in the sources, read on 5 September 2026. Where a component is unpublished the plan is excluded from that pattern, not estimated; the exclusion counts are 5, 15 and 18. Revolut Business, HSBC Kinetic and Starling’s sole trader account are outside the dataset because no readable tariff could be retrieved.

What the model records. Where a tariff prices several routes, the figure used is the one named in the dataset’s per-plan notes: the app rate for cheques at HSBC, NatWest, Lloyds and Virgin Money; for cash at Lloyds, the branch and Post Office rate (£1.60 per £100 plus 85p per credit) rather than the cheaper deposit-machine rate (£0.85 per £100). Tide’s cheque figure is the 70p line without the 20p transaction fee; its £2.50 cash fee is the rate “for deposits up to £500”, above which “0.99% on Free plans and 0.5% on Smart, Pro, and Max plans” applies. Santander’s cash allowance is applied as if deposits are made at Santander cash machines. Allica is recorded at its £0 headline. ANNA’s fees are “+VAT” and recorded ex-VAT; Tide’s page does not say whether its fees include VAT. Medians are read off the sorted rows; for an even count the two middle values are named, not averaged.

Scope and status. This is information about published tariffs, not advice, and no plan is recommended. Readers can enter their own volumes in the Bank Solutions calculator at https://www.banksolutions.uk/calculator/, built on the same dataset; the plans with no monthly fee are compared at https://www.banksolutions.uk/compare/no-monthly-fee/. Tariffs change with notice; the check date for every figure is 5 September 2026. Errors reported through the correction route on any Bank Solutions data page are corrected in place with a dated note.

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