accounting links

PAYMENT BEHAVIOUR DATA

The most predictive signal in your ledger.

How UK finance teams turn payment behaviour into a board metric, a fraud control, and a financeable asset.

39-day
cross-sector average

1 in 3
hit by AP fraud

19
UK sectors benchmarked

Inside this report

Why we wrote this

Most finance teams already hold the most predictive piece of evidence about their own operation, and never look at it.

It sits in the ledger, the payment runs, and the approval logs: a complete record of how every invoice was raised, approved, and settled. We call it payment behaviour data, and across hundreds of conversations with UK finance leaders we keep finding the same thing. The data exists, but it is trapped on one side of each relationship, recorded inconsistently, and never turned into something a board, a lender, or a procurement team can act on.

That is a waste, and an increasingly expensive one. Regulation now expects payment to be demonstrable rather than private. Fraud now targets the exact blind spot that unmeasured payment behaviour creates. And the commercial value of a clean, provable payment record is rising as it becomes visible across networks rather than locked inside single companies.

This report sets out what payment behaviour data is, why 2026 is the year it stops being a back-office statistic, what the UK numbers actually say once you look past the averages, and how a finance team should start measuring it.

It is written for CFOs, finance directors, heads of finance operations, and the internal audit and risk teams who carry the consequences when payment goes wrong.

Payment behaviour data is the verified, time-series record of how invoices settle: when an invoice was raised, approved, and paid, against what terms, and how consistently.

It is operational and continuous, which makes it different from a credit score, and more predictive of how a business actually behaves.

39 days

cross-sector average — yet the range runs from roughly 20 to 72 days.

1 in 3

UK businesses hit by accounts payable fraud each year.

£1.6bn

estimated annual losses, concentrated heavily in a few sectors.

Reported as a single average, payment behaviour is a footnote. Measured properly, it becomes three things at once: **a board metric** that shows how the finance function is really behaving, **a fraud control** that makes the abnormal visible against a baseline, and, once shared and verified across a network, **an asset** a supplier can be financed against and a buyer can evidence.

The work is not collecting the data. You already have it. The work is measuring it consistently, sharing it across the relationship, and keeping the record clean enough to stand behind. This report explains how.

What payment behaviour data is

Payment behaviour data is the verified, time-series record of how invoices actually settle between a buyer and a supplier: when an invoice was raised, when it was approved, when it was paid, against what terms, and how consistent that pattern is over time and across counterparties.

It is worth being precise about what separates it from the number finance teams reach for by habit. A credit score compresses years of borrowing and repayment into a single figure that updates slowly and answers a general question: is this business good for the money. Payment behaviour data answers a sharper, more operational one: how is this business actually paid, by whom, against what terms, and how stable is that behaviour.

The two are complementary inputs, not substitutes. One is a snapshot built from filed events. The other is a continuous record built from transactions.

For most UK finance teams, this data already exists. It sits inside the accounting ledger, the payment runs, and the approval logs. The problem is not capture. It is that the record is trapped on one side of each relationship, recorded inconsistently from one supplier to the next, and never aggregated into a form anyone can act on. The buyer sees their side. The supplier sees theirs. Nobody sees the pattern.

The work is not collecting payment behaviour data. You already have it. The work is making it consistent, shared, and clean enough to act on.

Why it matters now

Three shifts have moved payment behaviour from a back-office statistic to a strategic input, and they are arriving together.

01

Regulatory

HMRC's Making Tax Digital regime now covers all VAT-registered UK businesses, and the broader direction toward e-invoicing means a digital trail from invoice receipt to payment is becoming a baseline expectation rather than a feature. The Payment Systems Regulator's authorised push payment reimbursement rules have raised the cost of getting a single payment wrong. The UK Fair Payment Code asks businesses to evidence how they pay their suppliers, not simply to promise it. Each turns payment behaviour from something private into something demonstrable on request.

02

Fraud

Accounts payable is now a primary attack surface. Invoice redirection, mandate fraud, duplicate invoicing, and false supplier creation all exploit the same blind spot: a finance team that cannot see what normal looks like cannot see what abnormal looks like. Payment behaviour data is what makes the baseline visible, and the anomaly detectable — the difference between catching a diverted payment before it leaves and reconstructing it afterwards.

03

Commercial

Late payment is not distributed evenly, and the businesses that pay reliably increasingly want credit for it. As payment behaviour becomes observable across a network, it starts to behave like collateral. A supplier who can prove a clean payment record can be financed more cheaply. A buyer who can evidence fair payment can win supplier loyalty and qualify for procurement panels that ask for it. The signal acquires commercial value the moment it becomes verifiable.

What the UK data says

Headline averages hide most of what matters. The useful picture is at sector level, where the spread is wide and the risk is concentrated.

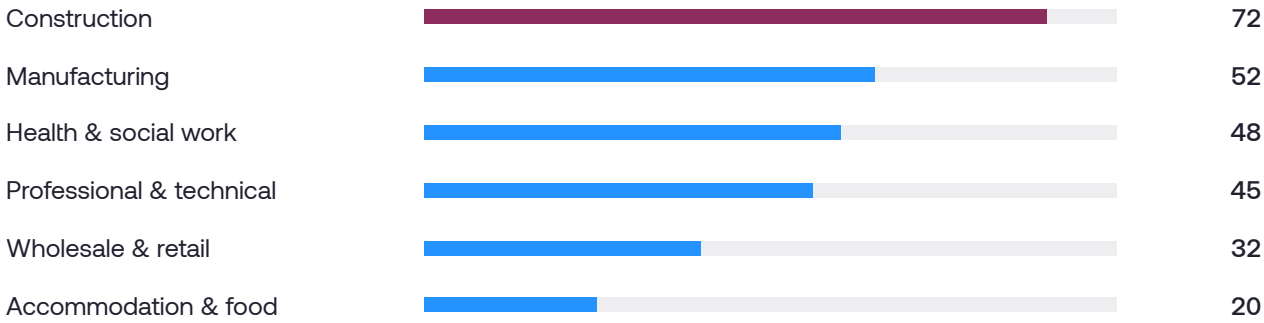
CROSS-SECTOR AVG
39d
average UK payment time

THE REAL RANGE
20–72d
accommodation to construction

FRAUD EXPOSURE
1 in 3
businesses hit each year

ESTIMATED LOSSES
£1.6bn
annual AP fraud, UK-wide

AVERAGE PAYMENT DAYS, SELECTED SECTORS



The average is not a useful planning number for any individual business, because almost no sector pays at the average. Fraud exposure tracks a similar pattern. **Construction** carries a critical risk rating, with an estimated £250m in annual losses and an average loss per incident close to £28,000, driven by complex subcontractor chains and multi-stage payments. Health and social work carries comparable estimated losses, with the NHS alone holding significant exposure to mandate fraud and false supplier invoicing.

One contributing factor is structural: a large share of UK businesses still lack automated invoice matching, leaving them exposed to all four common fraud types at once. The businesses slowest to pay and weakest at matching invoices are also the most exposed to fraud. Payment behaviour data is the connective tissue — the same record that tells you how fast you pay also tells you whether a payment request fits the established pattern or breaks it.

The sector benchmark table

UK payment and AP fraud benchmarks by sector, 2024 to 2025. Critical and High-risk sectors are highlighted.

SECTOR	AVG DAYS	AP FRAUD RISK	EST. LOSS	LIKELIHOOD & AVG COST
Agriculture & fishing	30	Moderate	£20m	1 in 6 · £12k
Mining & quarrying	50	Moderate	£12m	1 in 6 · £18k
Manufacturing	52	High	£150m	1 in 3 · £22k
Electricity & gas	38	Low	£40m	1 in 8 · £35k
Water & waste	38	Low	£20m	1 in 8 · £25k
Construction	72	Critical	£250m	1 in 3 · £28k
Wholesale & retail	32	High	£125m	1 in 4 · £18k
Transport & storage	48	High	£50m	1 in 5 · £15k
Accommodation & food	20	Low	£40m	1 in 7 · £8k
Information & comms	20	Moderate	£65m	1 in 5 · £25k
Financial & insurance	35	Moderate	£175m	1 in 5 · £45k
Real estate	28	Moderate	£40m	1 in 6 · £30k
Professional & technical	45	High	£65m	1 in 4 · £20k
Admin & support	42	Moderate	£50m	1 in 5 · £15k
Public administration	25	Moderate	£200m	1 in 5 · £40k
Education	30	Low	£40m	1 in 8 · £15k
Health & social work	48	Low	£250m	1 in 4 · £35k
Arts & recreation	38	Moderate	£20m	1 in 7 · £10k
Other services	32	Low	£15m	1 in 9 · £8k

Source: Accounting Links UK Industry Payment Benchmarks, 2024 to 2025. Full interactive version at accountinglinks.com/uk-industry-payment-benchmarks.

The CFO's payment behaviour scorecard

Most finance packs report a single working-capital number — usually days payable outstanding — and stop there. DPO tells you how long you take to pay on average. It does not tell you whether that behaviour is consistent, concentrated, drifting, or how it compares to your sector. A scorecard answers them. Four measures do most of the work.

On-time payment rate

The proportion of invoices paid within agreed terms — not the average number of days. A 39-day average can hide a book that is half paid early and half paid very late, and only the rate exposes that.

Payment consistency

How stable the pattern is month to month. Drift is an early warning, both for cash-flow strain and for fraud, because fraudulent activity often hides inside a period of unusual payment behaviour.

Concentration

What share of late payment sits with a small number of suppliers or a single category. Concentration tells you where relationship risk and renegotiation leverage actually live.

Sector benchmark position

How your behaviour compares to peers. Paying at 45 days means one thing in construction and another in professional services. Position, not absolute days, is the board-relevant number.

DPO describes what happened to the cash. A payment behaviour scorecard describes how the finance function is behaving, and where the risk is building.

From siloed reporting to a connected signal

Finance teams move through four stages as payment behaviour goes from invisible to strategic. Most UK SMEs sit at stage one or two.

1

Invisible

Payment behaviour is not measured. The team knows roughly how long payments take and reacts to supplier chasing. There is no baseline, so anomalies are caught by luck rather than by control.

2

Reported

The team tracks DPO and perhaps an ageing report. The data is backward-looking, internal, and rarely reaches the board in a form that drives decisions. Fraud controls are manual and depend on individuals remembering what normal looks like.

3

Measured

Payment behaviour is captured as a consistent, structured record. The scorecard exists. Anomalies are flagged against a baseline, the board sees position rather than raw averages, and supplier conversations are evidenced rather than anecdotal.

4

Connected WHERE THE VALUE COMPOUNDS

Payment behaviour is shared across the relationship and verified against the other side's record. Buyer and supplier see the same invoice status in real time. Verification becomes a shared signal rather than a chore repeated by every counterparty — portable enough to evidence the Fair Payment Code, act as a network fraud control, and eventually serve as a financeable asset.

The jump that creates the most value is from measured to connected, because payment behaviour is the wrong unit of analysis inside a single company. One buyer's history with one supplier is statistical noise. Aggregated across many counterparties and a meaningful time window, the same data becomes signal: benchmarks become possible, anomalies become detectable, and confidence tightens as participation grows. This is the logic that makes consumer credit bureaux work, applied to B2B payment — which is why this layer cannot be built four walls at a time.

What fair measurement has to look like

Payment behaviour data carries weight, so the way it is captured and used has to be defensible. Three principles hold whether the data is used internally or shared across a network.

01 **Verified**

Drawn from the underlying ledger of each side rather than self-reported, so that a record means the same thing to everyone who relies on it.

02 **Contestable**

Data is wrong sometimes. Buyers misclassify invoices, payment runs slip for reasons unrelated to the supplier, and credits and adjustments are recorded inconsistently across accounting systems. A business has to be able to dispute a data point, have it resolved against the underlying source, and have the record corrected — quickly enough to matter at the point where the data is being used.

03 **Jurisdictionally clean**

Payment behaviour data can be personal data where it relates to sole traders, partnerships, or named individuals, and it is regulated wherever it informs a lending or credit decision. GDPR, the FCA's stance on credit information, and the UK's emerging digital identity direction all apply. A measurement approach that ignores these constraints will not scale, and any use of the data in a financing or credit context should be reviewed against the current rules before it goes live.

These are not abstractions. They are the difference between a payment behaviour record that a board, a supplier, and a regulator will all accept, and one that nobody trusts.

Common mistakes

Reporting the average and stopping.

A cross-sector average of 39 days is useless for any single business. Measure the on-time rate and the distribution, not the mean.

Treating it as a tidy-up job.

Misclassified invoices and undisputed credits used to be back-office housekeeping. Once payment behaviour is a measured signal, they are distortions in an asset.

Keeping it internal.

The value compounds when the record is shared and verified across the relationship. A number only you can see cannot evidence fair payment or support a supplier's financing.

Confusing it with a credit score.

A credit score says whether a business is generally good for the money. Payment behaviour says how it is actually paid, by whom, against what terms. They are complementary, not interchangeable.

Ignoring sector position.

Paying at 50 days is unremarkable in construction and poor in food service. Benchmark against peers, not against a national average.

Buying automation that hides the behaviour.

Reducing keystrokes is not the same as making payment behaviour visible, comparable, and shareable.

How Accounting Links treats payment behaviour

Accounting Links is a connected accounts payable network, not a siloed automation tool. Buyer and supplier work on the same infrastructure — which is what makes payment behaviour a shared, verified signal rather than a private statistic.

- **Visible to both sides**

  Buyers and suppliers see the same invoice status, payment timing, and verification in real time, so the record is agreed rather than disputed after the fact.

- **Measured, not just reported**

  Payment timelines, delays, and patterns are captured as structured data you can benchmark — not a static ageing report you read once a month.

- **A fraud control, not only a metric**

  Because the network establishes what normal payment behaviour looks like across verified suppliers, requests that break the pattern — including bank-detail changes — are flagged before money moves.

- **Fair Payment Code aligned**

  The record is built to evidence fair payment across the supplier journey, rather than to assert it.

See your own payment behaviour, made visible.

Book a demo at accountinglinks.com, or compare your sector against the UK Industry Payment Benchmarks.

Methodology and sources

Payment benchmarks

Derived from UK government payment practices reporting, Atradius B2B Payment Practices 2025, Coface UK Payment Survey 2025, Begbies Traynor debtor days analysis, the Xero Small Business Index, and GoCardless industry research.

AP fraud risk & loss estimates

Based on the UK Finance Annual Fraud Report 2025, the NHS Counter Fraud Authority 2024 to 2025, the Public Sector Fraud Authority Annual Report 2024 to 2025, the Crowe and Peters & Peters Annual Fraud Indicator, Trustpair UK Fraud Report 2025, Ivalua invoice fraud research 2024, Cifas Fraudscape 2025, and the GOV.UK Economic and Social Cost of Fraud 2023 to 2024.

A note on the figures

Fraud loss values are mid-point estimates proportioned by sector gross value added, risk profile, and available incident data. Directly sourced figures are available for construction, health, public administration, and financial services. Other sectors are estimated. Figures are indicative and intended for benchmarking, not for accounting use.

Accounting Links

The accounts payable network that connects businesses and their suppliers. Verified identity, controlled invoices, and visible payment behaviour sit on one trusted layer, so both sides of a payment relationship work from the same record.

Built in London. Cyber Essentials certified. The first platform to integrate directly with the UK Fair Payment Code.

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