

Bare UK domain names

Management summary:

If you own a .co.uk domain name (purchased before 29 October 2013) you had the exclusive right to purchase a variant of that name without the .co element. That right expired in 2019.

Example: The owner of *honest-john-motors.co.uk* had the exclusive right to buy *honest-john-motors.uk* without the .co element, this is now known as a *bare .uk name* to distinguish it from the .co.uk version.

If you own a .co.uk domain name you should secure the bare .uk variant too if possible.

My advice is that you should not use the name but hold it “defensively” to prevent it falling into the wrong hands to your detriment.

Detailed answer:

Until 28 October 2013 all UK domains had to include an element between the name and .uk – so in addition to the well known **.co.uk** (intended for commercial use) there are **.org.uk** (for non-commercial organisations) **.ac.uk** (academic institutions) and several others. The **.uk** element is known as a Top Level Domain name (TLD).

The **.co**, **.org**, **.ac** element is a **second level name** and the *honest-john-motors* element a third level name.

You can add further levels to a name you own. You may have seen examples like *shop.nottinghamforest.co.uk*, a 4th separating the Notts Forest FC shop web site from their informational web site.

By far the most widely used second level .uk name is .co

Why the change?

1. Most other TLDs don't require a second level name so removing that requirement brings UK in-line with most other countries.
2. The change shortens names by 3 characters.
3. It almost doubles the number of .uk names available (in theory).
4. Bare .uk is limited to those with a UK address (in theory).

To expand on **item 3**: it's highly likely (and strongly advisable) that businesses owning a .co.uk domain name will buy the bare .uk variant to prevent the variant being snapped up by a scammer or competitor. Owners of .co.uk names for non-commercial purposes may be less concerned about a third-party taking the variant. The result is little increase in the meaningful availability of unique names.

Item 4: anyone can register .co.uk, bare .uk registrants “*must have a presence in the UK.*”

Theoretically this is “better”, for example Chinese companies have been registering .co.uk names to get the benefits of appearing to be UK based.

However it remains to be seen whether Nominet will check that contact details are valid or anything more than a forwarding service.

Should you buy the bare name?

The simple answer is “yes” but there’s a cost, an annual renewal fee with a retail cost which depends on the added value features like management, email, DNS and web routing.

The cost of a domain name is insignificant when compared with the cost of preventing a competitor diluting your brand or the cost and hassle of dealing with a scammer or a competitor passing themselves off as your business.

If you hold, as is very common, many .co.uk names to protect variants, trading names and brand names the annual cost may start to look high. (Example: I understand Unilever has many thousands to cover all their current and inactive brand names). Ideally you would buy all, my advice is to at least buy the bare .uk variant of any name you actively use for web and/or email addresses.

What are the reasons to buy the variant?

See “why the change” above but...

With a long name like *honest-john-motors.co.uk*, do the extra 3 characters matter?

Adding the bare .uk option may appear to make more names available but this is a bit of an illusion. Most .co.uk name holders will buy the corresponding .uk name to avoid the risk of confusion. If *honest-john-motors.co.uk*, found a competitor had bought *honest-john-motors.uk*, the original John would not be happy. In order to protect his business he would need to use Nominet’s Dispute Resolution Service (DRS) or a lawyer to attempt to gain control of the name. A few pounds a year to hold the name is chicken-feed compared with the cost of those alternatives.

A cynic might take the view that allowing bare .uk names is a bit of a scam on the part of Nominet (Nominet is the overall controller of .uk names). At a stroke they double their income for barely any effort on their part. They could (should?) instead just automatically give .uk name holders the corresponding .uk for at most a tiny price increase. Nominet has a track record – already highly profitable they increased their prices by 50% in 2016. Nominet is a “not for profit” company which sounds like a good thing so when I say they are profitable, to be clear they have no shareholders, “profit” is not distributed to investors. What they do have is a substantial number of very well paid staff.

Many organisations chose to buy their bare UK name defensively but not to use it (e.g. *bbc.uk*, *ibm.uk*, *tesco.uk*: all purchased but not used at time of writing).

Are there reasons not to buy the variant?

Longer term Honest John might take the view that *honest-john-motors.uk* is unlikely to be attractive to anyone else so it’s probably safe to disregard it. However shorter more generally applicable names, especially those made up of a short single word noun are highly valued and anyone owning one of those should keep both .uk and .co.uk for the longer term.

How should the name be configured/used?

There are four options:

Option 1:

Have all traffic addressed to *honest-john-motors.uk* routed to the current web site at *honest-john-motors.co.uk* so both variants take visitors to the same web site.

- If you were to use the name but chose to let it lapse at some future date then, as a formerly “active” name, its value to a third party becomes greater.
- Some care is necessary to provide consistency of web address, if visitors sometimes see the .co.uk variant and sometimes the bare .uk they may be confused or concerned.

- Some hosts will charge an annual fee for the redirection (it's a trivial configuration issue and should be free).

Option 2:

Do not actively use the name but route it to a holding page or make it return a “not found” or error page. At present, following the example of the BBC, IBM and Tesco, I favour this option. My reasoning is:

- Users are familiar with .co.uk (and .com) and may be suspicious of anything else. Bare .uk only serves to confuse the issue. As an example, HSBC caused some consternation (in Aug 2017) when users who'd accessed HSBC.co.uk found themselves redirected to the unfamiliar HSBC.uk (worse still HSBC.uk was not showing the green security lock icon).
- The only real benefit is saving 3 keystrokes – big deal!
Owners of a very short domain names may find bare uk more attractive, in some respects IBM.uk is “better than” IBM.co.uk
As a general rule short names have a higher commercial value.
- If usage remains low Nominet might do what they should have done in the first place and make a small increase in the wholesale price of a co.uk name but include the corresponding .uk variant.
- If you do hold the name it's a trivial task to switch to option 1. On the other hand if you chose to use option 1, it will become known to users, there may be external links routing to it so switching back to option 2 could present problems.

Option 3:

Make the bare .uk name your primary address for web and email and set .co.uk to redirect to the new variant. As well as some of the issues covered above, additional considerations apply

- You risk losing your current prominence in Google search results
- There's a risk of difficulties for people who already know your web and email addresses
- There'd be a need for changes to web site, printed stationery etc

Option 4:

Special situations: there are always exceptions, you should discuss that with an expert.

How might a scammer use a bare .uk name to my disadvantage?

They may decide there is nothing to be gained here, they may just seek out high-profile names. We are spending a few pounds to prevent a problem that may not exist. On the other-hand scammers do already try to find name variants in order to host sites holding malware. Recently I've been getting junk emails purporting to be from Amazon and using Amazon branding but the clickable links go to amazn.co.uk, how much more desirable would it be for them to host their malware at the bare .uk name: amazon.uk (which is why Amazon have already bought that).

For over ten years a common scam has been email (or even post/phone) messages proposing that you buy the .cn (China) or .asia variants of your name. A Google search for “chinese domain name scam” will find plenty of examples and explanations of how the scam works.

Bare .uk domain name scammers could do the same. As with the .cn and .asia names they will probably try to sell you a 10 year license at an attractive discount. Just bear in mind that these guys are crooks, now they've got your credit card details and various other pieces of personal information what are they going to do with them? They *may* actually buy the names and even register them to your postal & email address and phone number – but why bother, you've authorised a payment, why not take the money and run, or maybe just pay & register for a year so you'll not discover you've been scammed until the renewal falls due.

I was right to be cautious, reports have started to come in from businesses that failed to secure the bare .UK variant. This an example of the type of email domain name owners are getting.

Domain Name Selling Offer – [redacted].uk

Dear Concern Greetings from India!!!

I would like to take this opportunity to offer you one of the important domain names (At least I think) for your company as you have been expanding to UK. I have recently bought a domain name [redacted].uk I have turned down few purchase enquiries as I felt I should offer it your company first as owners of [redacted].co.uk rather than offering to someone else.

Kindly contact for further details if you are interested

Sincerely

Another possibility is that a past approach will be revived to exploit the confusion. In brief this was based around a statement that ".co.uk names are to be replaced by .uk.co names". The top level domain .co is the nation of Columbia, someone bought the right to the second level .uk and was selling .uk.co names. The same was tried but offering .uk.com versions. In those cases at least you'd have got a usable domain name but you would be at the mercy of the owner of the second level name (the uk. part). In future years they may hike the price excessively or mismanage the routing to your web site.