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Pictured at the launch of a four-year sponsorship partnership between Stena Line and Special Olympics Ireland are (left to right): Lucy Hayles, Ashwen Maliyakal, Master Mark Roberts and Sam Hayes.

STENA LINE LAUNCHES NEW 4-YEAR PARTNERSHIP WITH SPECIAL OLYMPICS IRELAND

Stena Line is proud to confirm a new four-year sponsorship agreement with Special Olympics Ireland (SOI), running from 2025 through 2028.

The sponsorship represents Stena Line's commitment to inclusion, the creation of opportunities for all, and the belief that sport can change lives. Through Stena Line's support, almost 7,000 Special

Olympics athletes from communities across the island of Ireland will gain greater access to training, competition, and personal development opportunities — from grassroots club sessions to representing Ireland

on the world stage.

This multi-annual partnership will help SOI expand programmes that build confidence, resilience, and connection among athletes with intellectual disabilities. It will also provide vital funding

to ensure that every athlete, regardless of circumstance, has the chance to reach their full potential in sport and beyond.

**Continued on
page 4**

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Belfast's Brilliant Christmas Countdown

The Northern Irish capital is once again preparing to transform into a stunning winter wonderland, with a spectacular programme of festive events planned for the countdown to Christmas 2025.

With Belfast already lit up for Christmas and Belfast Christmas Market, located in the grounds of City Hall, is already in full swing. This award-winning market runs until Monday, December 22, 2025. The market operates with extended hours: Monday to Wednesday (10 am – 8 pm), Thursday to Saturday (10 am – 10 pm), and Sunday (12 noon – 6 pm).

The seasonal magic extends far beyond the City Hall grounds, with a range of dedicated family entertainment and cultural experiences. One notable venue is 2 Royal Avenue, which hosts the Winter's Den until December 31. This free community and cultural hub offers a range of festive activities and is home to Santa's Post

Office (until December 21), allowing children to ensure their letters get a direct route to the North Pole.

A core Christmas tradition is the Pantomime season, which sees major productions take to the stage across the city. The Waterfront Studio is hosting two key shows this year: the family-friendly Jack & the Beanstalk: The Giant Family Pantomime, running from late November, and the return of the popular late-night adult pantomime, Red Riding Hoodz. For a more traditional circus experience, the much-loved Winter Circus returns to Writers' Square from Friday, December 12, offering spectacular performances and family fun right up to the New Year.

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HUSBAND & WIFE DUO GO THE EXTRA MILE RAISING FUNDS FOR ULSTER HOSPITAL RENAL UNIT

Head of Risk Management Advisory Services in the South Eastern Trust, Valerie Walker and her husband Edwin recently laced up their running shoes to take on the Great North Run Half Marathon Challenge, raising an incredible £1,404 for the Ulster Hospital Renal Unit.

The funds raised will be used to enhance patient comfort and wellbeing within the unit, making a difference to those receiving dialysis and renal care.

Explaining why they chose to dedicate their efforts to the Renal Unit, Valerie said, “Rather than raising money for a large national charity, we wanted to do something closer to home, something that would directly benefit the Trust I work for.

“We have renal disease in our family, there is a genetic link. Edwin’s mum had it and sadly passed away after years on dialysis in England. Both of Edwin’s sisters also have renal disease, one has recently had a very successful transplant, which is wonderful news. We have cousins in the family affected by it too. Our daughter also works in the unit, so it really means a lot to us.”

Edwin added his



Dr John Smyth (Consultant Nephrologist), Amanda Byers (Renal Unit Manager), Valerie and Edwin Walker and Claire McKenzie (Sister, Renal Unit)

appreciation for everyone who supported their fundraising efforts, saying “We would like to thank everyone who donated to this wonderful cause and to thank all the renal staff for the amazing work they do helping patients every day.

The kindness and support shown to us in raising this amount has been really humbling.”

Expressing thanks on behalf of the Renal Unit, Consultant Nephrologist, Dr John Smyth, added, “We are very grateful

to Edwin and Valerie for choosing the Renal Unit for this fantastic contribution. This donation will help us to improve our facilities in order to continue to provide our patients with the best care possible.”

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TRANSLINK ANNOUNCES DEFIBRILLATOR ROLL-OUT ACROSS NI RAILWAYS FLEET

Translink has announced that Automated External Defibrillators (AEDs) will be installed across the NI Railways train fleet by the end of December 2025.

Local trains will feature the new life-saving equipment which will play a vital service in helping people who suffer a cardiac arrest, which can happen to anyone. This latest development follows the installation of 134 units at over 80 locations across Translink bus and rail facilities in recent years.

Announcing the AED rollout on board trains, John Thompson, Translink

Head of Safety and Corporate Responsibility, said: "This latest development reflects our ongoing commitment to keeping people safe and these life-saving kits are currently being installed across our rail fleet.

"We know that with a cardiac arrest every second counts so having AEDs accessible to everyone on board a train could make all the difference in an emergency.

"Located within the train's first aid cabinet beside the accessible toilet, each defibrillator is also accompanied by step-by-step audio and visual instructions which are built into the unit and explain how to use it.

"We also provide online CPR training tools to support our employees should they find themselves in an emergency situation in the future."

Welcoming Translink's announcement, Fearghal McKinney, Head of British Heart Foundation Northern Ireland said: "Every defibrillator has the power to save a

life and it's great to see Translink's recognition of the importance of these life-saving devices by installing them in trains across Northern Ireland.

"There are over 1,400 out-of-hospital cardiac arrests every year in Northern Ireland. Tragically, less than one in ten people survive. This is partly because public access defibrillators are not used often enough.

"We're also delighted to partner with Translink to train their staff in CPR with our free and interactive online training tool, RevivR. Early CPR and defibrillation can more than double the chances of

survival. It takes just 15 minutes to learn through RevivR, and all you need is a mobile phone or tablet and a cushion – that's 15 minutes learning a skill that could one day save the life of a loved one." Fearghal added.

Michael Allen, Community Resuscitation Team Manager, Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, said: "Cardiac arrest can happen to anyone, at anytime, anywhere. This key initiative increases public access to vital, lifesaving equipment in the early moments of cardiac arrest, when time matters the most."



John Thompson, Translink Head of Safety and Corporate Responsibility, Fearghal McKinney, Head of British Heart Foundation Northern Ireland and Michael Allen, Community Resuscitation Team Manager, Northern Ireland Ambulance Service.

"Truly unique" Friendship Four

Tourism Northern Ireland is delighted to provide funding for the return of the Friendship Four ice-hockey tournament, set to take place in Belfast this month.

The annual event, founded by the Odyssey Trust, is the first and only National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division One men's ice hockey tournament to be held outside North America.

Held annually at The SSE Arena, Belfast, since its inception in 2015 the tournament has become a flagship event in Northern Ireland's sporting calendar - bringing world-class collegiate hockey to the city, while promoting education, cultural exchange and community engagement.

Skaters are set to take to the ice on November 28 and 29 with visitors given a unique opportunity to see four top American college teams go head-to-head. This year will see the Rochester Institute of Technology, Sacred Heart University, Miami University and Union College compete for the Belpot Trophy at the home of the Belfast Giants.

Last year's event attracted more than 20,000 visitors with 24% coming from outside Northern Ireland.

Around 400 participants took part in the 2024 event with almost 3,500 commercial bednights (hotel, B&B, guesthouse, self-catering) booked. The event last year generated £768,537 for the north's economy.

It is one of 14 events which recently secured funding through Tourism NI's International Tourism

Events Fund.

The ITEF supports events that attract significantly high levels of visitors to Northern Ireland while also generating international media coverage, which helps to showcase the region as a must-see travel destination.

Siobhan McGuigan, Head of Events at Tourism NI, said: "Tourism NI is delighted to support the Friendship Four ice-hockey tournament especially this year, as the event celebrates its 10-year anniversary.

"The Friendship Four is a thrilling sports event offering entertainment for all the family. Last year's tournament drew 20,000 visitors, 24% of which came from outside Northern Ireland.

"The event is a fantastic opportunity to attract visitors to Belfast outside the peak season and showcase the city's sports offering. We



wish the organisers every success with the 2025 tournament."

Steve Thornton, Sports Director of The Odyssey Trust, said: "This year's tournament is especially pertinent as we celebrate a decade of the Friendship Four. Since 2015, this ever-growing transatlantic event has provided North American student-athletes with a once in a lifetime

opportunity to travel overseas - for the first time in some cases - and experience all that Northern Ireland has to offer.

"From trips to iconic landmarks to team visits to local primary schools, the Friendship Four offers a truly unique chance for inclusion, collaboration, and shared learning experiences right here in Belfast.

"Working alongside local

bodies such as Tourism NI undoubtedly helps to make these overseas visits even more memorable for staff, travelling fans, students, and families. Once again, we're incredibly appreciative of Tourism NI's invaluable support in the lead up for the Friendship Four, and we look forward to working with them to make this year's tournament one of the best yet."

Continued from page 1

Speaking at the launch of this partnership, Special Olympics Athlete Ashwen Maliyakal (Basketball, Killester Basketball Club)

said: "As an athlete, Special Olympics has helped me to develop my sporting talents, make friendships, and grow in confidence and leadership skills - it's about helping everyone to be included and supported to find their full potential and be part of their community. It's great to see

that Stena Line are coming with us on the journey to make that a reality for everyone."

Johan Edelman, Trade Director for Stena Line says: "Marking 30 years of service in Dublin and 30 years in Belfast Harbour (20 Nov 2025) are significant

milestones for Stena Line, and we're honoured to celebrate them by launching a new four-year partnership with Special Olympics Ireland. Inclusivity and care are the cornerstones of our company, therefore we're delighted that we can support these incredible athletes and make a difference in local communities across Ireland."

Karen Coventry, CEO of Special Olympics says: "This partnership with Stena Line marks an exciting new chapter for Special

Olympics Ireland and the thousands of athletes we serve. This long-term commitment from Stena Line will have a truly transformational impact; empowering athletes at every level, from local clubs to international competition, to achieve their personal best. Partnerships like this don't just fund sport; they change lives, strengthen communities, and champion inclusion across the island of Ireland. We are deeply grateful to Stena Line for standing with us on this journey."

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New corporate Partnership for Northern Ireland Children to Lapland and Days to Remember Trust

Belfast-based Finlay Wealth Management has announced a three-year corporate partnership with the Northern Ireland Children to Lapland and Days to Remember Trust (NICLT) — a local charity that creates magical, once-in-a-lifetime experiences for children living with life-limiting and life-threatening conditions across Northern Ireland.

The Finlay Wealth Management team immediately signed up six colleagues to take part in NICLT's much-loved Walk to Scotland fundraiser, within just days of launching their campaign, the team had already raised over £4,000 in donations from clients, colleagues, and supporters.

Jonathan Finlay, Founder and Managing Director, Finlay Wealth Management, which was recently named Number One Small Business Worldwide by St. James's Place Services, outperforming more than 600 firms globally, said:

"We're delighted to partner with the Northern Ireland Children to Lapland and Days to Remember Trust for the next three years. This is an incredible local charity that makes a real difference to families at some of the most difficult times in their lives.

"Our team jumped at the chance to get involved and we're proud to already be part of the Walk to Scotland event. It's a fun and inspiring way to raise funds — and the thought that every step we take helps create lifelong memories for these children is truly

motivating."

Colin Barkley, Chair, Northern Ireland Children to Lapland and Days to Remember Trust, added:

"We're thrilled to welcome Finlay Wealth Management as a long-term corporate partner. Their early enthusiasm and fundraising energy perfectly reflect the spirit of our charity. The Walk to Scotland is a highlight of our fundraising calendar, and the commitment of businesses like Finlay Wealth Management helps ensure we can continue to make these magical experiences possible."

The Walk to Scotland, is one of the charity's most unique and uplifting fundraising events — combining a memorable day out with an incredible cause. Participants board the Stena Line ferry from Belfast to Cairnryan and take part in symbolic laps around the ferry deck to "Walk to Scotland," raising funds to help send approximately 80 local children to Santa's hometown in Rovaniemi, Finland — a magical day that provides joy, hope, and precious family memories.

The Northern Ireland



Children to Lapland and Days to Remember Trust is entirely self-funded, receiving no Government or Lottery support. The charity relies solely on the generosity of local individuals, community fundraising, and corporate partnerships to continue delivering its life-changing experiences for children and

families across Northern Ireland.

To find out more about the charity <https://nichildrentolapland.com/>

To donate to Finlay Wealth Management's Walk To Scotland fundraising efforts check out — Finlay Wealth Management is fundraising for Northern Ireland's Children to Lapland Trust

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LOOSE WOMEN’S AWARD-WINNING FACING IT TOGETHER CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED IN BELFAST

Justice Minister Naomi Long, Women’s Aid and PSNI have welcomed Loose Women’s Facing it Together campaign, focused on raising awareness of domestic abuse and the support available, to Northern Ireland.

Sarah Mason, CEO at Women’s Aid Federation Northern Ireland and Detective Chief Superintendent Zoe McKee, Head of Public Protection Branch at PSNI met with Loose

Women panelist Nadia Sawalha at CastleCourt Shopping Centre yesterday (Monday 3rd November) as she broadcast live on the lunchtime show to announce the next stage of the campaign – the roll out of a new Facing It Together poster that will be displayed in the shopping centre and other nationwide locations, helping people identify the signs of domestic abuse and the support available to those in need.

Producers of the daytime programme worked with Department of Justice, The Executive’s Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) Directorate, PSNI’s Public Protection Branch, Women’s Aid Federation Northern Ireland and Men’s Advisory Project (MAP) NI to spotlight local services providing support available in NI.

Having launched in GB last year, this is the second year of the campaign that will not only raise awareness, but encourage friends, family and community to recognise the signs of abuse, providing essential signposting and ultimately, breaking down the stigma and isolation of domestic abuse which nobody should face alone.

Justice Minister Long said; “Domestic abuse is a horrendous crime which has a lasting effect on victims and their families. I am delighted to support this campaign to raise awareness of this issue and to encourage victims to come forward for help. This campaign builds on the body of work being taken forward by my Department to prevent domestic abuse, provide support to victims and hold perpetrators to

account.” Detective Chief Superintendent Zoe McKee, Head of Public Protection Branch at PSNI commented; “Domestic abuse is a life changing crime that affects all our communities. Anyone can be a victim. We are supporting the ‘Facing It Together’ campaign through raising awareness of the issues related to domestic abuse. As a police service, we stand with victims, survivors, partners and communities to stop abuse and hold perpetrators to account.

“Last year we recorded 32,763 domestic abuse incidents and nearly 20,000 domestic abuse crimes, meaning that on average a domestic abuse incident was reported every 16 minutes. We are also making, on average, 84 arrests each month for domestic related offences.



We know there is under reporting of domestic abuse and this could be the tip of the iceberg. We cannot lose sight that behind each number is a person whose life has been affected by abuse. If you are experiencing or have witnessed domestic abuse,

please tell us. We will help.” Alongside the digital and ambient campaign throughout the mall, Women’s Aid hosted an on-the-ground information station at CastleCourt on the day, providing local support and information

for survivors, friends and family. Domestic Abuse affects all genders, ages and backgrounds. For further help and information, please contact the Domestic Abuse Helpline for Northern Ireland on 0808 802 1414.

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Upstream ABL kicks off new season of rugby sponsorship at CIYMS

Upstream ABL is supporting a new generation of rugby players by ramping up its backing of CIYMS Rugby Football Club and committing to the 1st XV Senior Squad.

The Structured Asset Based Lending specialist is partnering with the East Belfast club to become its main jersey sponsor, integrating its new Upstream ABL brand with players on and off the pitch.

This multi-season agreement further solidifies Upstream ABL’s commitment to the sport and the local community. “We’re thrilled to be partnering with Upstream ABL,” CIYMS Rugby Football Club President, David Peden, said. “As two brands who champion commitment to excellence, respect, and inclusion, Upstream ABL is a great fit for us, and we

look forward to sharing our successful growth journey together. “It’s important for CIYMS to build genuine partnerships with businesses that share our values which is why we are so delighted to widen our already strong relationship with Upstream ABL. We appreciate their support which has given us the opportunity to refresh our jerseys early in the 25/26 season.” Upstream ABL specialises in Structured Asset Based Lending – practical, flexible finance solutions that help ambitious businesses across the UK and Ireland grow with confidence by unlocking the value of their Balance Sheet assets. Lewis McCallan, Asset Based Lending Partner, Upstream ABL, said:



“We’re excited to see the Upstream ABL brand take centre stage this season as the Senior Team returns to Championship 1. Having been associated to CIYMS for 44 years – as a player, Captain, coach and now part of the Vice President cohort, formally partnering with the club was a natural next step. A key aim for

Upstream is to partner with people and businesses in our own community and we are proud to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with CIYMS Rugby Football Club.” Since 2011, Upstream has been helping SMEs and mid-sized corporate business owners to unlock essential working capital by way of revolving and term facilities.

Upstream ABL will release the cash which is tied up in assets such as debtors, stock, equipment, or property. This allows the business owner to invest in growth, and critically, to stay in control. Led by Judith Totten MBE, Lewis McCallan and Bill Hichens, Upstream ABL’s Belfast-based team brings deep financial expertise and a genuine passion for supporting businesses across every sector – from local firms to global brands. CIYMS Rugby Football Club is one of Northern Ireland’s oldest sporting organisations having celebrated its centenary during the 2022/23 season. Based at Circular Road in Belmont since 1974, ‘CI’ as its commonly known offers a range of sporting, leisure and social activities for all ages. There are currently 1,600 members of which 800 are children and young adults. For more information, visit www.upstreamabl.com

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NI CLUBS REEL IN SUCCESS WITH FISH4FUNDS BURSARY

A trio of Northern Ireland clubs are celebrating after winning the CompareNI Fish4Funds project, designed to support grassroots organisations and have a positive impact on local communities.



Ridgeway Rovers FC, Portstewart Men's Shed and Enniskillen Gaels have each received a £1,000 grant to help fund key initiatives that will benefit their local area.

Now in its second year, the Fish4Funds scheme is part of CompareNI.com's ongoing commitment to give back to communities across Northern Ireland, with five winners chosen each year. The programme was set up to mark the price comparison site's 15th anniversary of helping families save money.

The first winner, Ridgeway Rovers, is a small youth football club formed in 2003, who work tirelessly with kids in the community and surrounding

areas to help them progress in the sport. The East Belfast club plans to use the prize fund to further develop their coaching with IFA training courses and to purchase new training equipment for their younger players.

The next lucky winner was GAA club Enniskillen Gaels. Founded in 1927 and with around 600 young footballers in its ranks, the club hosts the Parish Street League, a beloved event that allows young children to get involved in Gaelic football in a fun, family-friendly environment. The funding will allow the club to expand the league, upgrade its equipment and keep fees low, making participation as

accessible as possible for all families.

The third grant went to Portstewart Men's Shed, which acts as a lifeline for many men by helping to improve mental and physical health through activities like woodwork, bike repair, gardening and cooking. With the group's current funding coming to an end, its members were delighted to win the Fish4Funds bursary, helping them rebuild their workshop and keep the club up and running.

The CompareNI Fish4Funds initiative was born after a survey revealed 40% of families here in Northern Ireland are part of a local club or team,

with 90% saying they are important for the local community.

However, nearly a quarter of those surveyed (23%) said they know a club or team impacted or forced to close due to financial hardships – with 75% agreeing these community initiatives are not getting enough funding and 63% saying they know a local club or team who needs the support.

The next two Fish4Funds winners will be chosen in January 2026, with each receiving £1000 to support their team or group – entries can be made via this short online form – <https://www.compareni.com/challengerod>.



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During our recent ETI Inspection Report (May 2025), they reported that:

- Teachers have high expectations of the children's behaviour, contributions and engagement in their learning.
- The wellbeing of the children is evidenced through the high levels of care, the high expectations for every child and the supportive working relationships across the school.
- The carefully planned, purposeful and highly effective integration opportunities provided across the deaf unit and mainstream classes impacts positively on the inclusion and learning experiences of the children.
- The enriching provision for deaf children is at the core of inclusion in this school.

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A shopper's paradise, Glasgow is recognised as having the best retail therapy in the UK outside of London. Consistently voted 'top of the shops', the city is Scotland's premier shopping destination.

Not just shopping,

Glasgow is also famous for its fantastic nightlife, and great choice of restaurants and bars. Glasgow is the perfect choice for your next city break away.

With a simple flat fare of £47 which includes the cost of the ferry and your bag, the Belfast – Glasgow Express offers a really attractive, convenient and low-cost alternative to flying.

The service is operated by HANNON Coach and leaves twice a day from Belfast, Grand Central Station (Stand 18) and drops visitors right in the heart of Glasgow's 'Style Mile'.



The simple flat fare allows passengers to pick and mix dates and times of travel to suit and with no luggage charges it makes a perfect travel option for Christmas shopping.

There are also a great range of hotels just minutes from Glasgow Buchanan Bus Station.

Company director Aodh Hannon says people seem to really love the convenience of the service as we take you right into the heart of the city centre.

"People love the fact that it's so hassle-free compared to flying, no airport transfers and with no extra charge for luggage it is a massive help with keeping the cost of a break down," said Mr Hannon.

The service can be booked online at www.hannoncoach.com up to 1 hour before departure or by phone using the very friendly telephone booking service.

Call 028 9265 0700 (Mon – Fri) or visit www.hannoncoach.com

A GULL CALLED KEVIN.

We live in a modestly sized apartment block in North Down, which since late summer has also been home to a juvenile herring gull, which we named Kevin, because his/her behaviour is reminiscent of Harry Enfield's character, Kevin the Teenager; grumpy, pleading, complaining and mildly irritating.

Often accompanied by an adult, presumably a parent, Kevin has become a fixture, if not sitting on a rooftop making a repetitive squealing sound, clearly begging for food (though largely ignored by the adult) then appearing, apparently from nowhere, when we're putting out food for small birds, and tucking into seed, meal worms and suet pellets. Given that we expect gulls to feed on marine life, and hang out around our coasts, this behaviour prompted me to find out more about them.

Herring gulls are typical of what we call seagulls, often seen scavenging around seafronts, and sometimes even trying to snatch chips or ice-creams out of our hands, and most of us would assume they're common. Wrong. They have been in decline throughout the UK and Ireland for years and are now red listed, meaning they're of serious conservation concern.

It might seem obvious, but, as with all animals (including us!), birds need



to eat to breed and survive, and, in addition to impacts of bird flu and global warming affecting coastal waters, it seems that food, or lack of it, is to blame for herring gull difficulties. Back in the day, rubbish tips or dumps as they were known, offered oodles of waste food to scavengers such as herring gulls, but H & S regulations and, of course, the welcome move towards recycling of waste food has progressively removed that option, as has greater efficiency and protection of fish brought ashore by trawlers.

At one time gull colonies

could depend on intertidal feeding on crustaceans and other marine life, along with forays into farmland, but intensive farming's impact on worms and other invertebrates has probably had an impact. So, as with so many wild creatures, herring gulls are being squeezed.

Kevin has found an unnatural food source, which we fear will not auger well for his (or her) lifespan, but hope that our unusual and intriguing visitor will eventually survive and prosper. You go, Kevin, our friend. We'll miss you when you've gone. JVA

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Colourful new mural strikes a chord

A new mural celebrating the value of music has been unveiled at the Telegraph Building in Donegall Street, marking four years since Belfast became a UNESCO City of Music - still the only city in Ireland to hold this title.

The colourful artwork, depicting different musical styles and genres, was created by artists Friz (Marian Noone) and Gerry Norman and commissioned by Belfast City Council.

The UNESCO mural is another welcome addition to the city's eclectic street art collection – much of which has been funded by council.

The artwork is also the latest initiative in the council's Music Matters programme which has seen £400,000 invested into the local music scene in the last year.

Projects to support local artists, ignite the live music scene, nurture new and breakthrough talent and maximise opportunities through the

UNESCO designation have included the Pathways into Music conference, helping music tutors and teachers support young people keen to break into the music industry; a music internship programme with WorkPlus, supporting four paid work placements with festivals and events providers; and a NI Venues Day, highlighting the value of local music spaces, together with the Music Venue Trust.

The council continues to fund both the Gradam Ceoil bursary scheme for traditional musicians, with the Duncairn and TG4, and a micro-bursary scheme, with Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival which, last year, provided 20 individual musicians with up to £1,000 of support each.

Funding has also been provided to a wide range of music events and festivals during 2025, including the second edition of the Soultrane

Festival in February, an all-ages event celebrating reggae and ska music at the Imagine Festival in March, the Output conference for industry professionals in September, the LyndonFest community festival in September and the NI Music Prize this week.

A sustainability toolkit for the music sector will soon be launched on the Music Connections website (musicconnections.com), while work is also underway on new programmes targeting young people, disabled music fans and local music businesses.

For more information about support for Belfast's music scene, visit belfastcity.gov.uk/music

Follow Belfast Music at @belfastmusic on Facebook, @ourbelfastmusic on X and @belfastmusic_scene on Instagram

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CHILD BENEFIT – PARENTS EXPERIENCING LONG PROCESSING DELAYS

New parents who have applied for Child Benefit are experiencing long wait times for their applications to be processed and even to receive a response from HMRC.

Employers For Childcare

These delays have been going on for some time, with parents who have already submitted an application waiting months for a response from HMRC. It seems that there is not much prospect of the processing times being reduced in the near future.

What is Child Benefit?

Child Benefit can be claimed by someone who is responsible for bringing up a child and it is often the first benefit that a parent will claim which is specifically linked to having a baby.

This benefit can provide vital financial support to parents at a time of increased household expenditure due to having a newborn baby

often coupled with a reduction in income as parents are receiving Statutory Maternity or Paternity Pay or Maternity Allowance instead of their normal salary.

Applications for Child Benefit and more information on the eligibility criteria can be found at www.gov.uk/child-benefit.

Payments for new claims of Child Benefit will automatically be backdated by three months from the date of submission or to the baby's date of birth, whichever is later.

How long is the delay?

At the time of writing the HMRC website says that for a Child Benefit application made in late October 2025 - a reply can be



expected in mid-March 2026. That is a delay of four and a half months, almost 20 weeks!

On the website it also states that they are currently processing claims that were received in June 2025, which again is well over four months ago.

Parents can check the progress of their own Child Benefit claim via the HMRC website: <https://www.tax.service.gov.uk/guidance/Check-when-you-can-expect-a-reply-from-HMRC>

Further information

If you would like further information on help what financial support your household may be entitled to, contact our Family Benefits Advice Service for free, impartial and confidential advice.

Contact us by emailing fbas@employersforchildcare.org – we are here to help.

MLAs get the message from deaf young people

The National Deaf Children's Society helped MLAs immerse themselves in the world of deafness and sign language at an event organised by the Assembly's Committee for Communities at Stormont recently.

At the request of the Committee, the charity invited deaf child Alexander Buchanan, 12, and his mother Natalia, from Waringstown near Lurgan, and Lydine McCaughran, the mother of a deaf daughter from Jordanstown, to meet the members.

Alexander, who was born deaf and communicates using speech and BSL, had the opportunity to share many first-hand insights into the world of deafness with the MLAs and talk about the daily challenges facing deaf children and their families in Northern Ireland.

Alexander, who attends Banbridge Academy, was joined by a group of deaf children from Jordanstown School, who had also been invited to come along to meet and talk to the Committee members.

Registered sign language interpreters were on hand to assist.

During their visit, the children took part in an important and fun activity

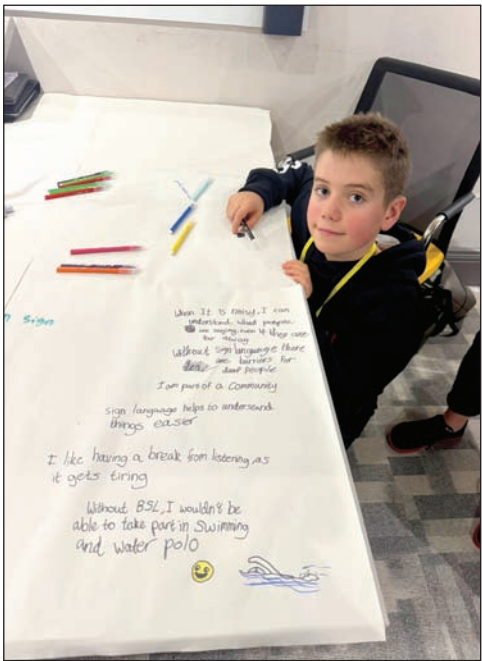
in which they wrote down what they wanted the Sign Language Bill to deliver and what they liked about sign language.

Among those present were the Chair of the Committee for Communities, Colm Gildernew MLA, and Committee members Andy Allen MLA, Nicola Brogan MLA, Pam Cameron MLA and Sian Mulholland MLA.

The event was organised as the Sign Language Bill is being scrutinised by the committee stage on its way to becoming law in Northern Ireland.

The Bill recognises and promotes BSL and Irish Sign Language (ISL), and places duties on public bodies to ensure that they are fully accessible to individuals in the deaf community.

The Assembly has vowed to prioritise the passing of the Bill into law during its current term. In February,



Communities Minister Gordon Lyons delivered the first part of his speech introducing the Bill to the Assembly in BSL. He described it as a "...long-awaited step forward in achieving the same rights and opportunities as those in the hearing community".

For more information, please contact the National Deaf Children's Society media team by calling 020 7014 1100 or emailing media@ndcs.org.uk

Escape to the Coast with Our Winter Warmer Package

As winter sweeps across the North Coast, The Causeway Hotel invites you to unwind with our signature Winter Warmer package with our perfect two night escape beside the world-famous Giant's Causeway.

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Guests can enjoy hearty food, coastal views, and the kind of warm Northern welcome that turns a short break into something truly memorable. The charm of our cliffside location, combined with the comfort of thoughtfully designed rooms and friendly service, makes this a winter stay to savour.

So whether you're planning a quiet couple's getaway, a mid-season recharge, or a chance to explore one of Northern Ireland's most iconic landmarks, the Winter Warmer offers a little bit of everything.

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APPLYING FOR A SCHOOL PLACE

Visiting a school is an important step in choosing a school, and this personal touch reflects Leadhill’s approach in supporting families.

As a smaller, nurturing school in the Castlereagh area, working to support parents and children is central to what Leadhill has to offer. Leadhill parents recognise the value of a primary school setting where every adult knows every child. Leadhill welcomes and supports children from all backgrounds and promotes inclusivity and child-centred approaches.

This year, Leadhill are offering a range of flexible opportunities to visit. Bring your nursery-age child to ‘Stay and Play’ session on Friday 16th January from 2:30pm to 3:15pm. Parents can enjoy a cuppa and a chat while children enjoy a range of activities in the P1 classroom.

Come along to our Open Day on 9 January, or arrange for a visit at a time that suits you, throughout



January. Mrs Millis, the Principal will take the time to tailor your visit to address the things that matter to your family. Visiting Leadhill during the school day gives a fantastic opportunity to experience the nurturing, family atmosphere and meet

the fabulous staff and pupils. For younger children, Toddler Time - Leadhill’s toddler and adult group, meets every Wednesday during term time from 9 - 11am. The Leadhill Website provides a useful window into

life in Leadhill. Visit us on www.leadhillps.com. Leadhill would love to welcome you for a visit. Contact the school office on 028 90401101 or email Mrs Millis on amillis370@c2kni.net to arrange for a suitable date and time.

FieldDay partners with Ulster Wildlife to encourage 5,000 households to Let Nature In bloom

Local County Down fragrance company FieldDay has partnered with local nature conservation charity Ulster Wildlife to encourage 5,000 households to get involved in the charity’s Let Nature In wildlife gardening campaign.

The campaign inspires households to take simple but powerful steps to support wildlife, starting in their own gardens. From planting native flowers for pollinators to leaving water and natural food for birds, these small changes can make a big difference for biodiversity.

Already more than 2,600 households have signed up to Let Nature In. And with one in nine native species at risk of extinction in Northern Ireland – including once-common garden visitors such as hedgehogs and house sparrows – the campaign has the potential to make a huge difference in helping bring nature back.

Dawn Miskelly, CEO of Ulster Wildlife, said: “We’re thrilled to partner with FieldDay to inspire even more people to take simple, positive action for nature. By making small changes at home, together we can make a big difference for local wildlife – helping to bring nature back, one garden at a time.”

Maureen Carvill, Wildlife Gardening Officer at Ulster Wildlife, said: “Our gardens collectively cover more land than all of Northern Ireland’s nature reserves, making



them a lifeline for wildlife especially as climate change and habitat loss take their toll. With FieldDay’s support, we’re aiming to reach our ambitious goal of getting 5,000 households involved – sowing the seeds of change and creating a network of wildlife-friendly spaces that will help nature thrive.”

Alix Mulholland, Co-founder of FieldDay, added:

“We’ve always been inspired by Ireland’s landscapes, and through this partnership with Ulster Wildlife, we can combine creativity with conservation. Helping people transform their outdoor spaces into havens for wildlife is a natural extension of our ethos – and it’s easier than people think, thanks to Ulster Wildlife’s fantastic step-by-step guides.”

Everyone who signs up to Ulster Wildlife’s Let Nature In’ campaign will receive a free digital pack, packed full of information to get started, plus seasonal advice and tips to help bring more nature into gardens, terraces, and balconies.

To join the campaign and bring more nature into your outdoor spaces, visit ulsterwildlife.org/let-nature-in



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Brilliant Live Entertainment Line-Up at Temple Golf Club for 2026!

Temple Golf Club has unveiled a spectacular series of live entertainment nights, featuring a brilliant line-up of tribute shows and ultimate party bands for the spring and summer season.

Get ready to book your tickets for a fantastic few months of music and fun!

The entertainment kicks off on Saturday, February 21st, with the **GARTH BROOKS & NEIL DIAMOND SHOW**. Starring Downtown Radio's Jason Hughes, this dual tribute promises a fantastic night of classic hits for just £18. Following this, cabaret returns on Saturday, April 11th, with The Band who couldn't retire tour...with the legendary **CLOUDSOUND!!**. For those attending the April event, tickets are priced at £45 and include a generous 2 Course Supper & Show.

The party continues into summer, beginning on Saturday, May 16th, with **THE SENSATIONAL 70S SUPERSTARS SHOW**. This highly anticipated performance, dubbed "THE ULTIMATE LIVE PARTY BAND!", features a spectacular tribute to **SMOKIE** and '70s number ones from legends like the Bay City Rollers, **SHOWADDYWADDY**, Suzi Quatro, **DONNY OSMOND**, Gloria Gaynor, Status Quo, and more.

Like the April show, this ultimate nostalgia trip is a 2 Course Supper & Show for £45. Finally, prepare to become a "Dancing Queen" on Saturday, June 13th, with the ultimate tribute act, **ABBA SENSATIONS!!**, offering all the iconic hits for just £20 per ticket.

Don't miss out! Tickets for all these brilliant events are available from the **CLUB BAR** by calling 028 9263 9213 or through **EVENTBRITE**. Book early to avoid disappointment!

A Guide to Mindful & Sustainable Gifting

Christmas shopping often feels like a frenzied race to acquire. This year, shift the focus from volume to value and embrace mindful gifting.

A thoughtful, eco-friendly present is not just kinder to the planet; it offers a deeper, more personal connection to the recipient.

Mindful gifting means choosing items that are: intentional, high-quality and built to last, and have a minimal environmental footprint. Ditch the fast-fashion holiday jumpers and disposable plastic trinkets. Here is a guide to choosing presents that truly matter—long after the wrapping paper is recycled.

The ultimate zero-waste gift is one you can't wrap. Experience-based presents create lasting memories and don't end up in a landfill. Class or Workshop; Tickets for a pottery class, bread-making course, or a nature photography workshop. They gain a new skill and a shared memory. Membership or Subscription; A pass to a local museum, National Trust/Park membership, or a digital subscription to an interest (e.g., an audiobook service or a meditation app). Voucher for Service; A gift certificate for a house cleaning service, a massage, or a home-delivered meal kit. This grants the gift of time or self-care. Planned Outing; A personally designed scavenger hunt, a picnic with local produce, or tickets to a concert or theatre show you'll attend together.

Help your loved ones reduce their daily footprint with beautiful, long-lasting alternatives to single-use items.

Reusable Food Wraps: Replace plastic cling film with beeswax wraps or vegan food wraps made from natural materials. They are washable, compostable, and come in beautiful patterns.

Insulated Reusable Bottles/Cups: A high-quality stainless steel water bottle or leakproof coffee cup is practical and helps eliminate single-use plastic cups.

Zero-Waste Cleaning: Gift a soap block for dishwashing, a set of reusable cloth dishcloths, or a natural cleaning kit with reusable glass spray bottles and concentrate refills.

Jars of Homemade Goods: Fill attractive, reusable glass jars with homemade granola, preserves, or infused oils. The presentation is personal, and the container is reusable.

When buying an object, look for ethical credentials. These gifts support responsible sourcing and local economies.

Secondhand & Vintage Treasures: A well-chosen vintage piece of jewellery, a classic vinyl record, or a beautiful antique book not only avoids new manufacturing but holds a unique history.

Locally Made Craft: Support local artisans and reduce transportation emissions.

Look for items made by hand in your area, such as ceramic mugs, wooden toys, or hand-knitted accessories.

Ethical Fashion Accessories: Choose small items made from recycled or upcycled materials, such as wallets made from reclaimed fire hoses or jewellery crafted from repurposed metals.

Grow-Your-Own Kits: A seed ball kit for wildflowers, an indoor herb garden set, or a potted succulent gives the recipient something living to nurture.

By shifting your mindset, you can give gifts that feel deeply personal, reduce waste, and truly bring joy without the burden of environmental guilt.



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TICKETS £20

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Rosetta Primary School

**Explore Rosetta:
Events for
Prospective Nursery
& P1 Families
2025/2026**



**Come and discover Rosetta
Primary School and Nursery!**

We'd love to welcome you into our warm and inclusive school community. Whether you're considering a Nursery or P1 place for September 2026, these special events offer a chance to experience the joyful learning environment that makes Rosetta so unique.



P1 - A Beary Special Afternoon

Thinking about a P1 place for your child?

We'd love to welcome all prospective P1 children to join us for a Beary Special Afternoon on Tuesday 16th December.

This is a fun and friendly session designed just for prospective P1 children.



Pre-School Peek N' Play

**Considering a Nursery place for
September 2026?**

We'd love to welcome you to a special play session at Rosetta Nursery Unit, designed for children and parents to enjoy together.

It's a gentle taster of the fun and learning your child could experience with us in Rosetta.

**Scan the QR code to
book your space.**

Spaces are limited.
Bookings close on 12th
December 2025.



**We look forward to welcoming
you to our school!**

Contact Us

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Website | www.rosettaps.co.uk

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Raising Mini Money Masters: Practical Financial Literacy for Kids

Financial literacy isn't just about saving; it's about building confidence, discipline, and critical thinking—skills that will benefit a child in every aspect of their adult life.

Research suggests that attitudes and habits about money are often formed by age seven, making the earliest years the most impactful for setting a strong foundation.

Here is an age-by-age guide to building a financially savvy generation, turning abstract concepts into concrete, fun, and empowering lessons.

Early Learners (Ages 3–6): The Power of Play

At this stage, learning is all about being tangible and visual.

Introduce Physical Money
Digital transactions are invisible, so start with the real thing.

Play Shop: Set up a pretend grocery store or lemonade stand using real coins. Teach them to match the correct coin to the price tag and count out the change. This reinforces basic maths skills while teaching the concept of exchange.

The Three Jars: Create three clear jars labelled "Spend," "Save," and "Give" (or "Share"). When they receive pocket money or gift money, let them physically divide it into the jars. This instantly teaches budgeting and delayed gratification in a visible way.

Elementary Explorers (Ages 7–12)

Children in this age bracket can grasp responsibility, planning, and the connection between work and reward.

Go Digital (The Prepaid Debit Card)

As they approach the teen years, introduce them to the digital economy safely.

Kids' Debit Cards: Use parent-controlled money apps (e.g., GoHenry, Revolut <18, or Rooster Money). These apps come with prepaid debit cards that parents load and monitor.

Track Spending: The apps allow them to see where their money goes. Use the transaction history as a budgeting lesson—did they spend half their money on impulse snacks, or did they save for the game? This connects digital spending to real-world consequences.

Teen Titans (Ages 13+)
Understanding Credit and Debt

This is a critical concept to avoid future pitfalls.

The Micro-Loan: If they need money for something but are short, offer them a small, internal family loan with clear, low interest (e.g., 5%). They must sign a simple "contract" and pay it back over a set period. This demystifies credit and shows them the cost of borrowing.

Credit Cards: Explain that a credit card is a short-



term loan, not free money. Teach them the importance of paying the full balance on time to avoid interest charges and build a good credit score (which impacts everything from renting an apartment to getting a mortgage).

Introduce the concepts that drive adult wealth.

Compound Interest: Use an online calculator to show them the staggering difference between saving £1,000 at age 18 versus age 30. Explain that they are earning interest on their interest—the greatest financial lever available.

The 50/30/20 Rule:

As they start earning money from a part-time job, introduce a simple budgeting rule: 50% Needs/Fixed Costs, 30% Wants/Discretionary Spending, and 20% Savings/Debt.

Ultimately, the best lesson you can teach your mini money master is to talk about money openly. Your own financial habits—whether good or bad—are the most influential curriculum they will ever receive.

Lead by example, be transparent, and your kids will grow up empowered, not intimidated, by their financial future.

Rosetta Primary School: A Community of Encouragement and Respect

Rosetta Primary School, located on the Knockbreda Road in South Belfast, is known for its commitment to inclusive education and a positive school environment.

The school's ethos is clearly reflected in its motto: "Everyone's invited. Everyone's included. Everyone's encouraged."

Rosetta Primary School has recently welcomed a new Principal to lead its dedicated staff. Mr McGarrigle took up his post at the start of the academic year, bringing his experience from his previous role as Acting Principal of Londonderry Primary School in Newtownards.

The school has a rich history dating back over a century, with the original school building opening in 1896. It has been a cornerstone of the South Belfast community ever since and now caters to children who travel from a wide area.

The core of Rosetta Primary School's philosophy is encapsulated in its three-part motto, which promotes an environment built on respect—for self, others, and the environment. The school is proud to be a School of Sanctuary, welcoming children from all faiths and none, and is committed to inclusive education. Rosetta Primary School is also proud to be a Forest School and recently achieved another Green Flag award for Eco-Schools ensuring all pupils are encouraged to thrive and work together towards a

sustainable lifestyle.

At the heart of Rosetta Primary School's philosophy is our three-part motto, which reflects our commitment to respect—for ourselves, for others, and for the environment. We are proud to be a designated School of Sanctuary, welcoming children of all faiths and none, and championing inclusive education for every learner.

Rosetta Primary is also a recognised Forest School, offering pupils opportunities to connect with nature and develop confidence through outdoor learning. Our dedication to sustainability is reflected in our recent achievement of another Green Flag award through the Eco-Schools programme, inspiring every child to work together toward a greener future.

Rosetta Primary School offers facilities that support a rich and balanced curriculum for both the primary school and its attached Nursery Unit. The school delivers a curriculum ranging from play-based learning in the Foundation Stage to an age-appropriate curriculum in Key Stage Two. The school is noted for its successful Activity-Based Learning in Key Stage One (P3/P4), which helps children develop skills across the curriculum.



Extra-curricular activities are a strong feature, kept at a minimal cost (or free when run by staff) to ensure access for all children.

Come see why Rosetta is a wonderful place for your child to grow and thrive at the forthcoming Open Day – Wednesday 3rd December. There will be a guided tour of Rosetta Primary School and opportunity to discover what makes the school so special. The school is also hosting two special events designed for families considering a Nursery or P1 place for September 2026. These events offer a chance to experience the warm, inclusive, and joyful learning environment at Rosetta. P1 - A Beary Special Afternoon is fun and friendly session

specifically designed for prospective P1 children which takes place on Tuesday, 16th December. Pre-School Peek N' Play, a special play session at the Rosetta Nursery Unit for children and parents to enjoy together—a gentle taster of the fun and learning in the Nursery is also being planned!

Spaces for both events are limited and require advance booking. The closing date for bookings is 12th December 2025. To secure a space, please scan the QR code provided on the advertisement or contact the school directly. Phone Number: 028 9049 1650 Website: www.rosettaps.co.uk Address: 21-23 Knockbreda Road, Belfast, BT6 OJA

Strathearn Head Girls Lead ‘Toasty Coats’ Drive to Warm East Belfast This Winter

In a heart-warming display of compassion and community spirit, Strathearn School’s Head Girls team — Jamillah, Charlotte, and Maddie — have helped bring warmth and hope to children across East Belfast through their support of the TOASTY initiative.

The project invites families to donate high-quality coats that their children have outgrown, ensuring they are passed on to local families who need them most during the coldest months of the year. Working closely with the Skainos Centre, the initiative transforms simple acts of generosity into practical, life-enhancing help.

TOASTY was created several years ago by Dr Patrick Campbell, whose awareness of the difficulties faced by some East Belfast families inspired him to take action. His goal was straightforward yet powerful: to keep children “toasty” warm while fostering a stronger sense of community care.

This year, Strathearn’s Head Girls embraced that mission with exceptional enthusiasm. Through careful organising, collecting, and coordinating across the community, the girls gathered more than 270 coats from several local primary schools as well as from the congregation at Knock Presbyterian Church. Each coat reflects



an act of kindness and a community’s shared belief that no child should face winter without warmth.

Mrs Connery, Principal of Strathearn School, expressed her gratitude to everyone who played a part in the project’s success. She praised the generosity of the entire East Belfast community and emphasised how vital such cooperation is during challenging times. Mrs

Connery added that she looks forward to supporting this meaningful initiative again next year.

The success of the TOASTY project was made possible by a network of dedicated supporters. Warm thanks go to Dr Campbell for his leadership; to the staff, pupils, and families of participating primary schools; to the facilities staff at Strathearn; and to the hardworking team at

the Skainos Centre. Their combined efforts ensured that every donated coat reached a child who will step into winter feeling warmer, safer, and cared for.

In a season often marked by harsh weather and rising need, TOASTY shines as a beacon of generosity — and a reminder that when a community comes together, even a simple coat can make a profound difference.

THE BUSY PARENT’S GUIDE TO SELF-CARE

The term “self-care” often conjures images of luxurious, uninterrupted leisure: an hour-long massage, a quiet afternoon reading, or, yes, a long bubble bath.

While wonderful, these activities are often completely out of reach for the typical busy parent juggling work, school runs, appointments, and household chaos.

True parental self-care isn’t about escaping reality; it’s about making strategic, micro-adjustments to your daily life to refill your cup without needing a full-scale vacation. It’s about maintaining your emotional and physical reserves so you can show up as the parent you want to be.

Here are some Quick Wins for Instant Relief

When you only have a few minutes, focus on simple, high-impact resets that shift you out of the stress response.

The Power of the 4-7-8 Breath: When you feel tension rising (e.g., during homework struggles or traffic), use this quick calming technique: Inhale silently through your nose for a count of 4. Hold your breath for a count of 7. Exhale completely through your mouth with a “whoosh” sound for a count of 8. Repeat 3–4 times. It physically

lowers your heart rate.

Tactical Hydration: Keep a water bottle with you at all times. Taking a big drink of cold water can provide a surprisingly quick mental and physical break. Dehydration often mimics fatigue and irritability.

The “Sensory Reset”: Engage one of your senses. Spray a scent (like peppermint or citrus oil) or listen to one specific song on headphones. This interrupts the mental loop of worry or to-do lists and grounds you in the present moment.

Mindful Movement: Instead of sitting down, stretch while waiting for the kettle to boil or for the kids to put on their shoes. A quick 60-second neck roll, shoulder shrug, or a forward bend releases physical tension instantly.

The most sustainable form of self-care is integrating it into your existing routine, rather than scheduling an extra activity.

By focusing on these small, consistent acts of self-care, you shift the perspective from “How can I escape?” to “How can I sustain myself?” You don’t need a bubble



bath; you just need to honour your own needs within the structure of your busy life.

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UNWRAP THE MAGIC: EXCITING CHRISTMAS FAMILY ACTIVITIES

As the days grow shorter and the air turns crisp, Northern Ireland transforms into a winter wonderland, buzzing with festive cheer.

From dazzling light displays to enchanting Santa experiences, there's a sleigh-full of activities to delight families in the run-up to Christmas. Get ready to create cherished memories with these magical outings!

Step into a Fairytale at Antrim Castle Gardens Enchanted Winter Garden

One of Northern Ireland's most beloved festive attractions, the Enchanted Winter Garden at Antrim Castle Gardens is a truly immersive experience. As dusk falls, the historic gardens are bathed in a spectacular display of light installations, soundscapes, and interactive features. Wander through glowing tunnels, marvel at

illuminated sculptures, and let the festive atmosphere transport you. It's a perfect evening out for all ages, offering stunning photo opportunities and a truly magical ambience. Other venues such as Mount Stewart and Royal Hillsborough normally offer similar experiences - check their websites for details!

Meet Santa in Style

No Christmas is complete without a visit to the big man himself! Northern Ireland offers a plethora of ways to meet Santa:

- Traditional Grottoes:

Many shopping centres like CastleCourt in Belfast and FoyleSide in Derry, along with various garden centres, host traditional



Santa's Grottoes. These are often beautifully decorated and provide a classic meet-and-greet experience with a festive gift.

- Santa Steam Trains: For an extra special journey, hop aboard a Santa Steam Train! Often run by heritage railways (Check out Downpatrick Railway), these experiences allow families to enjoy a festive train ride through scenic landscapes, with Santa making an appearance onboard to chat with children and hand out presents. It's a truly memorable way to combine a love of trains with

Christmas magic.

- Farm Park Experiences: Local farm parks (such as Mountpath) often transform for Christmas, offering "Winter Wonderland" events that include meeting Santa, seeing his reindeer, and enjoying festive activities like elf workshops and seasonal crafts.

- Take in a Tour of Lights. Take a drive or walk around your local area to see and admire the efforts of neighbours. Or make time to visit neighbouring town and village town centres and markets - remembering of course to buy local!

The Eastside Awards 2026 Set to Celebrate East Belfast's Best

The annual Eastside Awards, in association with Belfast City Airport, are gearing up for their most significant celebration yet: their monumental tenth anniversary.

The highly anticipated event, which shines a spotlight on the people, businesses, schools, and community groups driving the social and economic development of East Belfast, will culminate in a spectacular ceremony on Friday, January 30, 2026, at the iconic Titanic Belfast.

For a decade, the Eastside Awards have been a central fixture in the city's calendar, acknowledging the hard work, creativity, and resilience of nearly 400 finalists. This anniversary year promises to be the biggest yet, featuring an expansion to 21 diverse categories, new sponsors, and the prestigious new venue.

The 2026 awards feature a broad and inclusive range of categories, ensuring that every facet of the community's brilliance is recognised. Nominations and applications, which closed in October 2025, span business, education, arts, sports, and community work.

The awards process is split into several types:

Awards by Application/Judging: These categories require a formal application and are assessed by a judging panel. Examples include: Business Start-Up; Business Growth;



Community Impact; Sustainable Business of the Year & Young Person of the Year

Awards by Public Nomination and Vote: These categories rely on the community to nominate and then vote for their favourites, ensuring the winners are truly community champions. Public voting, which ran until mid-November 2025, determined the top finalists. Popular categories included: Favourite Primary/Post-Primary Principal; Volunteer of the Year; Local Sporting Hero; Favourite Food Destination; Heritage and History

Outstanding Contribution Award: Chosen directly

by the Eastside Awards committee, this award celebrates a lifetime of dedication to East Belfast.

The sheer volume of nominations—with public voting often exceeding 20,000 votes—underscores the community's commitment to recognising its local heroes.

The awards ceremony on January 30, 2026, will be a glittering gala dinner hosted by TV personality Tara Mills. The move to Titanic Belfast marks a significant upgrade, promising a truly memorable evening to honour the finalists and reveal the ultimate winners.

Organisers and sponsors alike have

expressed their pride in the awards' milestone. Jonathan McAlpin, Chair of the Eastside Awards Committee, noted the event's evolution into a "jewel in the city's awards calendar," highlighting the role of the awards in showcasing East Belfast as a vibrant and inspiring place to live, work, and visit.

As the community eagerly anticipates the announcement of the shortlisted finalists and the final winners, the Eastside Awards 2026 stands as a powerful testament to the passion, talent, and community spirit that defines this unique corner of Belfast.

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'The Phat Fryer' is Now Open!

'The Phat Fryer' a new business owned by Bangor businessman Jason Walsh is now open!

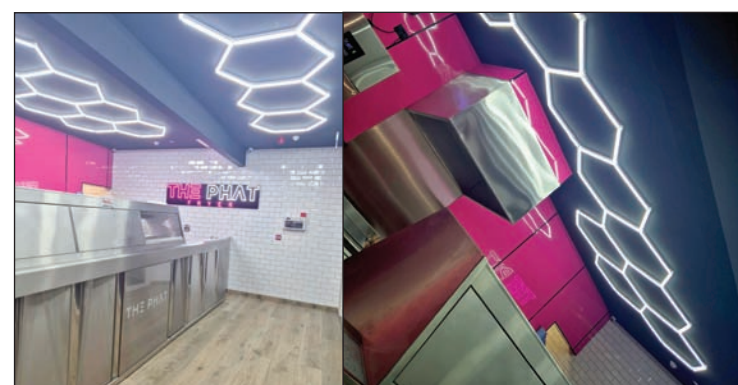
'The Phat Fryer's' new food offering celebrates the classics: perfectly battered cod alongside generous portions of freshly cut chips. Like any good Northern

Irish chippy, Phat Fryer knows its audience and expands its offerings to include regional favourites. You'll also find Pastie Suppers: A distinctly Northern Irish delicacy—a deep-fried savoury mince and potato patty and Extensive Chip Toppings: From the essential gravy and curry sauce to the ever-popular cheesy chip, there's a topping for every mood.

In a city with a competitive takeaway scene,

The Phat Fryer is already being praised for its quality and consistency. Locals often highlight the perfectly crisp batter, the fluffy potato in the chips, and the overall excellent value for money.

So, next time you're in Bangor and in search of the ultimate comfort food experience, follow the locals to The Phat Fryer, on the Gransha Road you'll quickly understand why this Bangor chippy is gaining a huge following!



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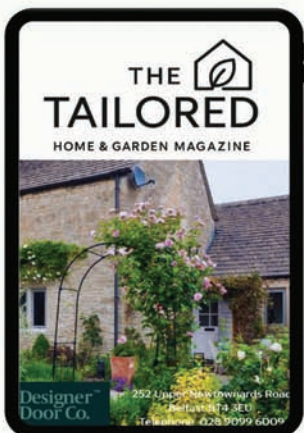


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UK’S BIGGEST FOOD COLLECTION CALLS FOR VOLUNTEERS TO SUPPORT CHARITIES.

With food banks and charities facing continued high levels of need this winter, people are being urged to give the gift of their time to take part in the UK’s biggest food donation drive.

Now in its 13th year, the Tesco Winter Food Collection is taking place in all Tesco stores from November 27th to November 29th. Tesco’s charity partners, Trussell and FareShare, are calling for volunteers to sign-up to support the event in store as both charities are providing a lifeline in response to high levels of need.

During the collection Tesco customers will be encouraged to donate long-life food to support the charities in their work. Donations for Trussell will help its community of food banks provide emergency food parcels to people who cannot afford the essentials, while donations to FareShare will support its network of 8,000 local charities and community groups helping to feed people in local communities

across the UK. Volunteers will help out at collection points in Tesco stores to raise awareness of the impact every single donation will have on people across the UK, who rely on Trussell and FareShare for food.

Donations are needed now more than ever, with one in five Trussell food parcels coming from Tesco and its customers.

Kris Gibbon Walsh, CEO at FareShare said: “Food from FareShare reaches a network of over 8,000 charities across the UK, enabling them to provide food support alongside access to other vital services. In the winter months, many people accessing these local groups are forced to choose between keeping warm and eating. This makes the Tesco Winter Food Collection more



important than ever. We know from experience that having volunteers present in store significantly increases the number of food items donated, and hope that more people than ever will generously

give up their time this year. By volunteering just three hours, people can play an important part in our mission and help create lasting change, one meal at a time.” You can sign up

to volunteer in your local Tesco store with FareShare at <https://fareshare.org.uk/foodcollection/> or with Trussell at <https://www.trussell.org.uk/support-us/tesco-food-collection>

PHA recommends daily vitamin D supplement

The Public Health Agency (PHA) is encouraging people across Northern Ireland to consider taking a daily vitamin D supplement to support wellbeing during the autumn and winter months.

Vitamin D is obtained through sunlight, diet and supplements. In Northern Ireland, from October to early spring, it is more difficult to get enough vitamin D from sunlight, and while foods such as oily fish, eggs, meat, dairy products and fortified cereals can help, most people still require a daily supplement at this time of year to support healthy bones, teeth and muscles.

Dr Hannah McCourt, Health and Social Wellbeing Improvement Manager at the PHA, said: “During the spring and summer months, our bodies can make the vitamin D we need from food and sunlight on our skin. However, during the autumn and winter months, with reduced daylight, we advise people to consider taking a 10-microgram supplement of vitamin D every day to help keep bones, teeth and muscles healthy.”

Some groups are advised to take a daily

10 microgram vitamin D supplement throughout the entire year. These include:

- Pregnant and breastfeeding women
- Breastfed babies from birth
- Babies receiving less than 500ml of infant formula per day
- All children aged 1–5 years
- People aged 65+
- People who are not exposed to much sunlight
- People with darker skin tones, including those from African, Afro-Caribbean or South Asian backgrounds

Vitamin D supplements are widely available in community pharmacies and supermarkets. Families may also be eligible for support through the Healthy Start scheme.

Hannah added: “You can buy vitamin D supplements at your local community pharmacy and most supermarkets. If you’re at least 10 weeks pregnant or you have at least one child that’s under four, and you’re in receipt of

a qualifying benefit, you can also request vitamins as part of the Healthy Start Scheme. You will also be eligible for Healthy Start if you’re under 18 and pregnant, even if you are not claiming any benefits, or you claim income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and are over 10 weeks pregnant. Visit www.pha.site/healthystart for more information. If you are not sure which supplements to take, ask your pharmacist, GP or health visitor for advice.”

Further information on vitamin D is available at www.pha.site/vitaminD

The Public Health Dietitians Group has also launched a new online video explainer, “The truth about: Vitamin D and your health”, which is available to watch on YouTube. The short video highlights who needs vitamin D, why it matters, and how to top up safely: www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRE7eLZzqq4

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New Pilot Project to Tackle Domestic Abuse and Homelessness supported through NIHE’s Homeless Prevention Fund

Housing Rights has received funding from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) for a bespoke pilot project, designed to provide crucial support for people affected by domestic abuse and homelessness across Northern Ireland.

The project, which has been funded for an initial six months through NIHE’s Homeless Prevention Fund, will deliver tailored housing advice and support to people affected by domestic abuse and either at risk of or already experiencing homelessness, in community locations across Northern Ireland. The pilot will see the provision of dedicated advice clinics to ensure people in crisis get the help they need, when they need it.

The project is the first stage of a new service the housing charity plan to deliver to ensure improved support for the increasing number of households affected by the issue. According to statistics from 2024/25, the PSNI is called to a property in relation to domestic abuse every 17 minutes, and in 2024/25, 1, 2059 households presented as homeless to the NIHE due to domestic abuse. The true figures are much higher and often go unreported due to stigma and fear.

This project will allow Housing Rights to deliver

person-centred legal and housing support directly to those who need it the most. The project will focus particularly on areas outside of Belfast, working in partnership with local Women’s Aid groups and NIHE regional offices.

Brenda Parker – Housing Rights Head of Services commented,

“We are delighted to be able to bring forward this pilot project and grateful to NIHE for their support. The new service builds on the existing work we have been doing with our partners in Women’s Aid and with people affected by domestic abuse who have bravely shared with us their experiences. We know from this work that victims and survivors of domestic abuse face additional challenges which can increase their risk of homelessness. Through this project, we will be able to offer a bespoke specialist service targeted at preventing homelessness for those who have experienced domestic abuse.”

In addition, Housing Rights has also been funded to upskill 90 frontline staff in the housing sector, so that they can better support those who have experienced domestic abuse. The training, which was co-developed with women who had experienced domestic abuse and homelessness, uses an immersive Virtual Reality experience, alongside a knowledge-based training module to build empathy, raise awareness and develop the skills needed to support people experiencing domestic abuse with their housing issues.

Key Project Features:

- Targeted Support: Focused on people affected by domestic abuse and homelessness.
- NIHE Funding: Secured for the first six months via the Homelessness Prevention Fund.
- Services: Delivery of housing clinics, advocacy, and representation.
- Partnership: Working closely with local Women’s Aid and NIHE, with an emphasis on regional areas.

£1.1M MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS PROGRAMME

Communities Minister Gordon Lyons has announced that 134 grants will be issued to individuals, bands and groups from across Northern Ireland, who have been successful in the 2025/26 Musical Instruments Programme.

The programme was open to individuals, bands and professional and non-professional performing groups to purchase new musical instruments and replace old ones.

Minister Lyons said: “Firstly I want to congratulate all the successful applicants of this year’s Arts Council of Northern Ireland’s Musical Instruments Programme. Music is part of our culture and it enriches our cultural experiences.

“I recognise that funding is a challenge for many individuals, bands, groups and organisations across the entire music and arts sector so I am pleased to be able to announce this funding which makes a difference across Northern Ireland.

I am delighted to see an increase in awards from 119 last year to 134 this year with increased capital investment from £823k in 2024/25 to £1.1m in 2025/26. This demonstrates the need and I will continue to support those who strive to improve the standards



Communities Minister, Gordon Lyons pictured with Ciaran Scullion, Head of Music and Opera, Arts Council, Joanne Quigley, Newry Chamber of Music, Sreehari Prakashan, drummer and members of the Cairnabana True Blues Flute band pictured at Parliament Buildings for announcement of the successful applicants of the Musical Instruments Programme.

of musicianship in Northern Ireland.

I am also very pleased to see the spread of funding reaches all local council areas.”

The Musical Instruments Programme is designed to help musicians in Northern Ireland replace their old, worn-out instruments and purchase new ones.

A total of 134 grants have been awarded through the Programme, which saw 94 bands (£819,405), 12 professional and non-professional performing groups (£134,928) and 28 professional musicians (£148,667) receive funding.

The Musical Instruments Programme includes three strands:

- The Bands strand of the programme was created to support bands based in Northern Ireland, which are formally constituted, including accordion, brass, flute, pipe, wind and concert bands.
- The Professional and Non-Professional Performing Groups category was open to choirs and orchestras, community music groups, musical societies, primary and post primary schools and youth groups.
- The third strand is for Individual Professional Musicians.

More information on the successful applicants can be found on the Arts Council NI website at <https://artscouncil-ni.org/resources/musical-instruments-awards>

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ALL-NEW LEAF HITS THE ROAD

The Nissan LEAF – the world’s first mass-market electric vehicle when it originally launched in Europe in 2011 – is back, signalling Nissan’s determination to be at the forefront of electric innovation.

Proudly built in Britain, at Nissan’s world-class EV manufacturing site in Sunderland, the all-new third generation model has hit the roads for the first time in Copenhagen, boasting an elite level range of up to 386 miles alongside a sharp new look, integrated technology and a host of new driver assistance features.

Designed at Nissan’s Global Design Studio in Atsugi, Japan and built at Nissan’s Sunderland Plant, UK, the all-new LEAF presents a dynamic crossover look that blends aerodynamic efficiency and visual impact. With a drag coefficient of just 0.25, the car’s clean, flowing appearance not only looks sharp and brings a real presence to the road, it also supports the model’s excellent 386 miles top range and its general efficiency.

Supporting its sleek and streamlined look,

Nissan LEAF boasts a host of upgraded exterior features, carefully engineered to catch the eye and confirm that our zero-emission masterpieces don’t skip on style.

The cabin inside is spacious and family-ready, including up to 437 litres (VDA) of cargo space. Power liftgate and roof rail options add flexibility, while seven expressive colour choices – including signature Luminous Teal – ensure the Nissan LEAF can be personalised to suit families, commuters, urban explorers and weekend day-trippers alike.

Built on the CMF-EV modular platform shared with the Nissan Ariya, LEAF delivers engaging yet comfortable driving. The suspension - MacPherson at the front and multi-link at the rear – ensures a smooth, agile drive across city streets and motorways.



At the heart of the Nissan LEAF is a refined electric motor delivering clean and responsive performance – 215hp of power and 355Nm of torque power the LEAF from 0 to 62mph in 7.6 seconds (Sport Mode / 75kwh battery). With 4.5 miles/kWh miles energy consumption, all-new LEAF ensures effortless driving with maximum efficiency.

The Nissan LEAF is equipped with a suite of advanced safety

and driver assistance features, designed to support confident driving in all conditions. From Intelligent Emergency Braking and Blind Spot Intervention to Rear Cross Traffic Alert and Lane Keep Assist, Nissan LEAF is engineered to deliver peace of mind. Additional features such as the 3D Around View Monitor, Invisible Hood View, and Front Wide View make parking and navigating tight spaces easier and safer.

At the heart of the LEAF’s connected experience is NissanConnect with Google built-in, delivering seamless integration with daily life for the modern driver.

Nissan LEAF will be manufactured in Sunderland, UK, using 20% renewable energy. Production and pre-orders to start before the end of the year, with first deliveries set for Spring 2026.

The MINI Paul Smith Edition.

Paul Smith and MINI – two traditional British brands have taken their partnership to the next level and created something great: The new MINI Paul Smith Edition.

Following the MINI STRIP in 2021 and the MINI Recharged by Paul Smith in 2022, the British designer is now bringing his world-famous design language – ‘Classic with a twist’ – to the new MINI family. Whether electric or combustion engine, the edition will be available for all MINI Cooper 3-door, 5-door and Convertible models, with the exception of the John Cooper Works models. The look and details not only show Paul Smith’s signature style – but also the brands playful, optimistic and independent spirit.

Combining MINI design with Paul Smith’s distinctive style: Exclusive exterior colours, sophisticated accents and unexpected details bring the shared history of MINI and Paul Smith into the present.

The MINI Paul Smith Edition offers a choice of three exterior paint finishes, two of which are edition-exclusive: Statement Grey is a modern interpretation of the classic Mini Austin Seven colour from 1959 – a clear, bluish-tinted grey shade and self-confident statement of timeless modernity. Inspired White is a contemporary homage to the popular Classic Mini

Beige colour, and finally the elegant and classic Midnight Black Metallic from the current MINI Family.

All edition vehicles are equipped with 18-inch Night Flash Spoke black aluminium wheels with tinted clear coat in Dark Steel. The MINI logo at the front and rear is offered in newly designed Black Blue and complements the colour composition of Paul Smith and MINI. On the black horizontal handle strip at the rear, Paul Smith’s signature refers to the creative spirit behind the vehicle design.

British character is also reflected in the interior with numerous components featuring a modern, elegant

look. The knitted surfaces on the dashboard and door panels appear in black, while Paul Smith fabrics in tone-on-tone stripe patterns serve as inspiration for the special structure of the dashboard. The Nightshade Blue sports seats are made of Vescin and have knitted textile in the shoulder and headrest areas. Drawn from the Signature Stripe, the decorative stitching on the steering wheel’s textile band is designed in bright colours – quintessentially Paul Smith.

To mark the 40th birthday of the classic MINI in 1999, the fashion designer dipped an exclusive one-off in his characteristic stripe design, using 86 stripes in 26 colours.

DFI Launches Road Safety Campaign: Be Bold. Be Seen

Minister for Infrastructure Liz Kimmins has launched a new road safety campaign to encourage road users to be more visible as the darker winter months approach.

‘Be Bold. Be Seen’ encourages pedestrians, cyclists, and other vulnerable road users to wear bold bright or high-visibility clothing.

Far too many lives are being lost and too many families lives are shattered by the worst possible news and evidence shows that people who walk, cycle or ride a horse are among the most vulnerable groups of road users.

Tragically, more than one in five people killed on our roads over the past decade were pedestrians. Stark statistics have revealed that, on average, 10 motorcyclists are killed on our roads every year.

The campaign features three striking visuals that will appear on the rear of buses, posters and a social media campaign.

1. You wouldn’t be seen dead in this

This visual delivers a hard hitting message, that being invisible on the road is a risk not worth taking. The slogan plays on the double meaning of being seen both in terms of fashion and survival.

2. Take a fashion risk not a safety risk

This creative approach is designed to capture attention quickly, particularly in high-visibility formats such as bus rears, by linking fashion choices with personal safety.

3. If he could he would The message is clear: while wildlife has no control over its visibility on our roads, people do. Whether walking, cycling, or working near traffic, choosing to wear high-visibility clothing can be the difference between being seen and not.

By using this relatable and emotive image, the campaign aims to spark conversation and encourage

behavioural change, especially as daylight hours shorten in autumn.

Minister Kimmins said: “Road safety is a priority for me as Infrastructure Minister as we work hard within the Department to reduce the number of road deaths and serious injuries on our roads.

“This campaign uses simple but powerful images to remind us all that visibility is a choice.

“We hope it encourages people to think twice before heading out without high-vis gear, especially during darker months.

“Be Bold Be Seen is

a particularly important message for those who might be most vulnerable on our roads as the nights get darker including pedestrians and cyclists.”

The latest road safety campaign complements recent work undertaken by the Department to improve road safety

behaviour.

Current campaigns include safety around school buses for children www.sharetheroadtozero.com/DriversThinkSafety WhenPassingBuses, and a TV campaign which urges pedestrians and drivers to recognise the shared risk of

using the roads: www.sharetheroadtozero.com/ PedestrianSafety.



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Prepping Your Home for a Tradesman's Arrival

You've signed the quote, agreed on the schedule, and cleared your calendar. The professional plumber, electrician, or decorator is scheduled to arrive tomorrow. Your job is done, right? Not quite.

A tradesman's ability to work quickly, cleanly, and efficiently often hinges on the preparations made by the homeowner. Think of it as the "pre-game"—the small steps you take now that save hours of labor costs and prevent common job site headaches.

Spending 30 minutes on preparation can translate into hundreds of pounds saved and a much smoother overall experience. Here is a three-step checklist to ensure your project starts quickly and smoothly.

1. A professional's hourly rate starts the moment they arrive. Every minute spent moving furniture, boxing up knick-knacks, or sweeping up clutter is time you are paying for, which delays the actual work.

2. Create a Buffer Zone: For internal work

(plumbing, electrical, decorating), clear a space at least three feet (one metre) around the immediate work area. If they are working on a kitchen wall, empty the adjacent cabinets and move the dining table.

3. Remove Personal Items: Take down all wall art, framed photos, and mirrors in the vicinity, as vibration from tools can cause them to fall. Roll up area rugs and remove curtains if the work involves a window or door.

4. Provide Clear Access: Ensure the path from the entryway to the work zone is completely clear. If they need to haul materials, make sure there are no obstacles like parked cars in the driveway or garden tools blocking the gate.

5. Pro Tip: If the work is dusty (e.g., sanding

or demolition), ask the tradesman beforehand what they recommend for protecting nearby items. They often expect you to have cleared the area, not for them to spend time masking delicate items.

A critical aspect of professional work is access to necessary resources. Before the contractor arrives, confirm these three basics:

Power: Locate and clearly label your consumer unit (fuse box) and ensure the area around it is accessible in case a breaker needs resetting.

Water: If the work involves plumbing, ensure the main water shut-off valve is accessible and that you know how to operate it (and share this knowledge with the tradesman). If they will need to clean tools, designate an accessible sink or outdoor tap they can use.

Parking and Access: If parking permits are required in your street, let them know in advance. If there are specific entry or exit rules for your building (e.g., block of flats), communicate these clearly.

Communicate on Pets, Children, and Security

Safety and clarity are paramount on a job site.

Secure Pets and Children: Construction sites are inherently unsafe for children and pets. Even a friendly dog can become a hazard by walking over tools or distracting a professional operating machinery. Secure pets in a closed room or outdoor space before the tradesman arrives and keep children away from the active work zone.

Communicate House Rules: If you have special requirements (e.g., taking shoes off, specific bathroom usage, or a quiet time for naps), communicate these upfront, not during the work.

Review the Scope: Have a quick five-minute conversation when the team arrives to review the work area, confirm what they plan to achieve that day, and address any last-minute questions.

By preparing your home, you demonstrate respect for the professional's time and expertise, which fosters a better relationship and ensures your project starts quickly and progresses without costly friction.

SETTING YOUR 2026 HOME REPAIR BUDGET

The New Year is a time for resolutions, but for homeowners, the smartest resolution is financial: getting ahead of inevitable wear and tear.

A house isn't a stagnant asset; it's a collection of systems that require constant funding. By budgeting proactively, you replace the stress of emergency repairs with the power of planned investments.

Calculating Your Annual Maintenance Budget

The first step is establishing a baseline for routine care and unexpected small repairs. Professionals use a few rules of thumb:

- **The 1% Rule of Thumb:** Budget 1% to 4% of your home's value annually for maintenance and repairs. If your home is valued at £300,000, that means allocating £3,000 to £12,000 per year.

- **Newer Homes (under 10 years):** Stick closer to the 1% range.

- **Older Homes (over 30 years):** Plan for 2% to 4%, as major components are likely due for replacement.

- **The Component Age Method (More Accurate):** Instead of a percentage, look at the remaining lifespan of your major systems. This is the most accurate approach for long-term planning.

If a new roof costs £12,000 and is expected to last 20 years, you should budget £600 per year for the roof alone. Repeat this for your boiler, water heater, etc.

Establishing an Emergency Fund for Major Replacements

While the annual budget



covers ongoing costs (gutter cleaning, boiler service, minor plumbing), a separate Capital Replacement Fund is essential for high-cost, systems-level failures that often happen suddenly. This includes your Boiler/heating system, roof, water heater and exterior paint/render.

Start with a Goal: Aim to save a minimum of £3,000 to £5,000 as a readily available, "liquid" emergency fund for unexpected events like a burst pipe or structural repair.

Fund the Future: The remainder of your calculated annual savings should go into a dedicated, high-interest savings account earmarked strictly for these major replacements. This prevents you from taking on high-interest debt when the boiler inevitably fails in mid-winter.

The Upgrade vs. Repair

Decision

When a major component breaks, you face the crucial question: Should you pay for a repair, or upgrade the system entirely? A professional should help you weigh these three factors:

The 50% Rule (Cost vs. Replacement)

If the cost of the repair exceeds 50% of the cost of a brand new, equivalent system, replacement is almost always the more economical choice. For example, if a new boiler is £4,000, but the repair quote is £2,200, opt for the new unit. You gain a full warranty and new lifespan for a slightly higher investment.

Age vs. Efficiency (The Payback Period)

Especially for heating systems (Boilers, HVAC), age is the enemy of efficiency.

Repair if: The system

is under 10 years old and the repair is minor (e.g., a simple thermostat replacement).

Upgrade if: The system is over 15 years old or you've noticed a significant increase in energy bills. New A-rated condensing boilers or heat pumps are so much more efficient than older models that the energy savings often pay back the installation cost within a few years.

The Frequency of Failure
If you are calling a repair professional more than once a year for the same system, it is showing systemic failure and should be replaced. The cumulative cost of recurring service calls, labour, and minor parts will quickly outweigh the cost of a reliable new installation. Frequent failure is a clear sign that repair is just delaying the inevitable.

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EFFICIENCY UPGRADES THAT REALLY SAVE YOU MONEY

When facing the costs of home maintenance, homeowners often ask: Which investments genuinely pay us back? With rising energy prices, the greatest return on investment (ROI) often comes not from aesthetics, but from efficiency.

From a tradesman’s perspective, these three upgrades are the most impactful ways to slash utility bills and increase your home’s value in 2026.

Insulation: The Foundation of Savings

Before considering new technology, look at the basics. Proper insulation is arguably the best return on investment a homeowner can make. It’s a one-time cost that dramatically reduces heat transfer, extending the life of your heating and cooling systems because they don’t have to work as hard.

Attic/Loft: Ensure

your loft meets current recommended insulation levels, focusing on the R-value (a measure of thermal resistance). Upgrading from older, shallow insulation to modern, thick materials can cut heating bills by up to 25%.

Cavity Walls: If your home has unfilled cavity walls, insulating them is fast, relatively inexpensive, and stops a huge amount of heat from escaping.

Investing in robust insulation is like putting a thermos around your home—it keeps the expensive,

conditioned air in, providing immediate and consistent savings.

Smart Thermostats: Smarter Heating, Not Harder

For a relatively small initial outlay, a smart thermostat offers powerful control. These devices learn your routines, automatically adjust temperatures based on whether you’re home, and can be controlled remotely.

While a smart thermostat doesn’t technically generate savings, it maximizes the efficiency of your existing system by eliminating wasted energy. You stop



heating an empty house. Furthermore, many models provide detailed energy usage

reports, allowing you to identify and adjust inefficient habits. This technology offers

a quick ROI, often recouping its cost within the first year through optimised

scheduling.

The Leap to Heat Pumps

For major, long-term savings, few systems rival the Air Source Heat Pump (ASHP). Unlike traditional boilers that burn fuel to create heat, ASHPs extract heat from the outside air (even when it’s cold) and use a heat exchanger to transfer it indoors.

While the initial installation cost is significant, government incentives and the unit’s incredible efficiency make it a powerful investment:

Exceptional Efficiency: ASHPs produce significantly

more energy than they consume, often achieving efficiencies of 300% or more, compared to around 90-95% for high-efficiency gas boilers.

Dual Function: They provide highly efficient heating in the winter and cooling in the summer, replacing two separate systems.

A heat pump represents the future of home heating, offering a substantial ROI over its 15- to 20-year lifespan through vastly lower running costs. When calculating your 2026 budget, prioritise efficiency; it’s the professional way to future-proof your bills.

A Checklist for Hiring a Contractor

The New Year often brings plans for renovation, repair, or that long-deferred major project. Yet, for many homeowners, the process of hiring a qualified professional—be it a plumber, electrician, or general contractor—is riddled with anxiety.

As tradesmen, we see the costly results of shortcuts and rushed decisions. We know the difference between a professional who stands by their work and one who cuts corners. To protect your investment and ensure quality, use this simple 5-point checklist, straight from the professional’s perspective, before you sign on the dotted line.

1. Verify Licensing and Insurance: Your Baseline Protection

This step is non-negotiable and is your first line of financial defense. Always ask for proof of two key documents:

- **Licensing:** The contractor must hold a current, valid license relevant to the work being performed in your specific area. A licensed professional has demonstrated competency and is bound by industry standards and local building codes.

- **Insurance:** They must carry both Public Liability Insurance (to cover accidental damage to your property, e.g., if they accidentally drop something through the ceiling) and Employers’ Liability Insurance (to protect you if a worker is injured on your

property). Without this, you could potentially be held financially liable for significant damages or medical bills.

Pro Tip: Never rely solely on a photocopy. Look up the license number and insurance details yourself via the relevant local trade or regulatory bodies to confirm they are active and in good standing.

2. Demand a Detailed, Written Scope of Work (Quote)

Verbal agreements invite costly misunderstandings. A professional quote—or Scope of Work (SOW)—must be more than just a single price. It should be a blueprint for the entire job.

Insist that the SOW clearly defines what is included and, crucially, what is not included. It must specify:

- **Materials:** Exact brand names, model numbers, and quantities of materials (e.g., “Dulux Trade Vinyl Matt in Brilliant White,” not just “paint”).

- **Labor:** The estimated time frame and the breakdown of labor costs.

- **Payment Schedule:** A clear plan of payments tied to completed, verifiable milestones. Avoid large upfront



deposits; a reasonable deposit is acceptable, but payments should reflect progress.

- **Change Orders:** A defined process for how scope changes will be documented, priced, and approved by you before the work proceeds.

3. Review Portfolio Examples of Relevant Work

While enthusiasm is great, major projects demand proven experience. Ask potential contractors for references and, specifically, photos or site visits related to the project you are hiring for.

If you are renovating a bespoke bathroom, ask to see recent bespoke

bathroom renovations. If you are hiring a roofer, ask for evidence of similar-sized and similar-style roof installations. This confirms that the tradesman has mastered the specific skills and logistical challenges your job presents. A quality professional is always proud to show off their recent work.

4. Check References (and Ask the Right Questions)

Don’t just ask for references; ask for the most recent references and actually call them. This is where you gain insight into the contractor’s process, not

just their final product.

When you call, ask questions that go beyond “Were you satisfied?”:

- Did they stick to the budget? If not, what caused the deviation?

- How did they handle unexpected issues? (The true test of a good contractor is how they

solve problems, not if they run into any.)

- Was the site kept tidy and safe?

- Would you hire them again?

5. Evaluate Communication and Professionalism

The way a contractor handles communication before the job is often a perfect reflection of how they will manage the job itself. Pay close attention to these cues:

- **Punctuality:** Did they show up on time for the consultation?

- **Clarity:** Did they clearly and patiently answer your technical questions, or did they use jargon to confuse you?

- **Respect:** Did they respect your time, home, and budget constraints?

A successful contractor is not only skilled with tools but also skilled at project management and

client relations. If you sense poor organisation or a lack of attention to detail now, those issues will inevitably amplify once the construction

starts. Choosing a tradesman isn’t just about the lowest price; it’s about investing in trust, reliability, and quality that will last.

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