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Belfast painting and decorating apprentices with PDA Chief Executive, Neil Ogilvie (centre), David Hope from competition sponsor Brewers Decorator Centres, judge Andrew Davis and Sandra McMurren, Tutor and assessor for painting and decorating at Workforce Training Services in Belfast (right).

Eighth Annual Learning Awards

Open College Network NI (OCN) has announced details of its eight Learning Endeavour Awards, which will be held at Titanic Belfast on 23rd June 2026.

The awards recognise and celebrate the achievements of learners and their training providers by showcasing the power of learning to transform lives for the better.

Now in its eight year, the awards event provides a platform to celebrate the inspirational achievements of learners and the commitment of the centres that support them across Northern Ireland.

Unique within NI's education and training landscape, the OCN Learning Endeavour Awards bring together learners and educators from schools, further education colleges, private training providers, and community and voluntary organisations. The event highlights the dedication, resilience and personal growth of individuals who have pursued OCN qualifications.

Martin Flynn added:

"We look forward to welcoming more than 300 guests, including finalists, their families, educators and special guests. As in previous years, we are pleased to offer learning bursaries to both winners and highly commended participants. We strongly encourage eligible learners and centres to submit nominations so that together we can celebrate the value and importance of vocational learning."

OCN Recognised learning centres across Northern Ireland are now invited to submit nominations for their exceptional learners.

Nomination forms for the OCN NI 2026 Learning Endeavour Awards are available now via OCN's website <https://ocnni.org.uk/learner-awards> until 4pm on Tuesday 7th April 2026 with the awards ceremony taking place at Titanic Belfast on Tuesday 23rd June 2026.

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UK-WIDE SEARCH FOR TOP APPRENTICE GOES TO BELFAST

The UK's largest trade body dedicated to the painting and decorating sector has hosted a competition event for apprentices in Northern Ireland for the first time.

The Painting and Decorating Association (PDA) called on apprentices to put their skills to the test and see if their stamina, accuracy and creativity match up to those of their peers from across the country.

Top scorers from the first ever Belfast heat will battle it out in a Grand Final round in England, with those awarded the PDA Apprentice of the Year title receiving their prizes at the Association's

prestigious Premier Trophy Awards ceremony in London.

PDA Chief Executive Neil Ogilvie said: "Painting and decorating is a skilled craft, and our competition events are designed to test the precision, knowledge

and flair of apprentices, as well as giving them a chance to connect with like-minded people and be in with a chance to take home the coveted title.

Continued on page 4



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1,000 volunteers now signed up for this summer's Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann

Belfast has reached an impressive milestone on its journey to hosting the world's biggest celebration of Irish music and culture – with 1,000 volunteers now signed up to support the delivery of this summer's Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann.

Those recruited will play a vital role as street ambassadors, competition support and other key positions as they help welcome the iconic event to the city for the first time from Sunday 2 to Sunday 9 August.

Volunteers have signed up from all parts of Belfast, Ireland and across the world, following a successful recruitment drive from Volunteer Now, together with Belfast City Council, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and Ards CCE.

Opportunities for additional volunteers to sign-up will remain open for another few weeks, with further information available at fleadhcheoil.ie/volunteer

With over 800,000 visitors expected, the council is also ramping up engagement with individual sectors across the city to plan a vibrant, safe and welcoming event.

In-person information



sessions for city centre organisations will take place on Thursday 5 and Friday 6 March at the MAC from 10am to 11.30am. These will look at proposed road closures, traffic management arrangements and licensing processes, and offer businesses the chance to ask questions and provide feedback.

A specific briefing for hotels, bars, restaurants and cafés will also take place on Monday 23

March at City Hall from 12pm to 2.30pm.

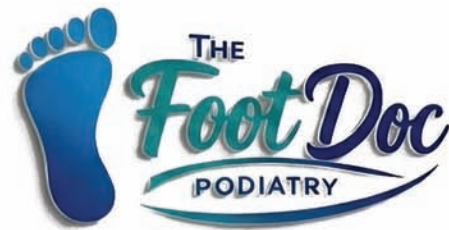
This session will share insight on visitor flows and peak demand times from previous Fleadhs to help guide business planning, as well as providing ongoing support around outdoor trading and entertainment plans.

For more information about the business information sessions and to register, visit www.belfastcity.gov.uk/fleadh For those unable to

attend the events in person, further online information sessions will be delivered in the coming weeks.

Monday 23 March is also the closing date for applications to the council's Bank of Ideas scheme which is inviting residents to submit creative ideas that support the event through its theme of 'Celebrating Together'.

More information can be found at belfastcity.gov.uk/culturefunding



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View the menu here: <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/visit-and-learning/members-dining-room/mdr-menu> or for more details on visiting Parliament Buildings: <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/visit-and-learning/visit/>



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EVENTS AIMED AT ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS TAKING PLACE

Belfast City Council has organised a series of events this March as part of ongoing work to support the NI Executive in implementing its Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls.

They included the recent 'One Step Louder', a family fun day at Girdwood Community Hub to mark International Women's Day and we are looking ahead to 'Her Safety, Our Responsibility' lunchtime panel discussion at Walkway Community Centre on

Friday 27 March. Following on from last year's successful It's a Team Effort conference, Belfast sports clubs can register for a free follow-up workshop on Tuesday 24 March at Olympia Leisure Centre to build their skills and become safeguarding champions for both

female and male players. Events are also planned with the city's culture and arts sector on Friday 27 March, as well as those working to design new public and outdoor spaces on Tuesday 31 March, to look at how these industries can better support women and

girls. An event will also take place at the MAC on Tuesday 31 March, together with Queen's University and other community partners, to discuss work with men and boys and consider new ways to engage with them in tackling the perceptions and behaviours that can lead to violence against women and girls.

The council has also provided a further £340,000 of funding towards 23 community projects, bringing to 50 the number

of local initiatives supported through its Local Change Fund. Among the work supported so far are new theatre productions, workshops for teenagers, training for the city's LGBTQIA+ and minority ethnic communities, programmes with sports organisations and work with schools and young children.

Free training is also available to help community organisations recognise the signs of domestic abuse and coercive control, and build



confidence in how best upcoming events, council's website at to provide support. workshops and training belfastcity.gov.uk/endviolence Details of all available are on the

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MENTAL HEALTH TEAM HONoured WITH REGIONAL AWARD FOR CRISIS AMBULANCE SUPPORT

Congratulations to the Hear & Treat Project Team, who were highly commended at this year's Blue Light Awards in the Innovation & Operational Excellence Award category.

The project, a partnership between the South Eastern Trust and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS), supports people experiencing a mental health crisis by providing expert assessment and

de-escalation during 999 calls.

Since its launch in 2024, the initiative has helped reduce unnecessary Emergency Department admissions, with staff handling more than 400 mental health related calls for patients at weekends.

Funded by the Public Health Agency, the project involves 12 Mental Health Practitioners from the South Eastern Trust working alongside NIAS staff in the Belfast Control Room. They operate on Fridays and Saturdays from 7 pm to 3 am and on Sundays from 3 pm to 11 pm, offering critical mental health support to callers



in crisis. Delighted to be commended, South Eastern Trust Project Lead, Stephanie Patten, said, "This recognition reflects the incredible dedication,

skill and compassion of our Hear & Treat Team. Working alongside NIAS, our Mental Health Practitioners make a real difference in people's lives every day, helping to provide timely

support, reduce pressure on emergency services and ensure people in crisis get the care they need.

"I am incredibly proud of what the Team has achieved."

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Continued from page 1

"Apprentices who have competed in the past regularly tell us that taking part in the contest boosts their confidence and encourages them to

improve their skillset and map out a career plan.

"For the first time this year, the PDA hosted a competition event in Northern Ireland, and we were impressed with the calibre of apprentices who showcased what

they have learned as they work towards a career in colour.

"The top scoring junior and senior apprentices will be invited to travel to Doncaster in Yorkshire for the Grand Final and if they make it through to the top three, will have the option to be a part of our flagship event of the year, the Premier Trophy Awards."

During the competition event, held at Workforce Training Services, 11 apprentices faced a gruelling six-hour challenge to map out, scale up and precisely paint an intricate image

designed to test their stamina and skill.

They join dozens of apprentices who will compete at regional heats in Glasgow, Merthyr Tydfil, Plymouth, Birmingham and Preston ahead of the Grand Final in June.

Charlie Montgomery from Carrickfergus returned in the Senior Plus category, having been the first entrant from Northern Ireland to participate in the competition, travelling to Birmingham as a Junior in 2023 and again as a Senior last year.

To find out more about the PDA visit: www.paintingdecoratingassociation.co.uk

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Belfast secures \$1 million to help transform alleyways

Belfast has been selected as one of only 24 cities worldwide to receive \$1 million (approximately £750,000) through the Bloomberg Philanthropies Mayors Challenge 2025 - 2026, supporting an ambitious programme to transform how the council and neighbourhoods work together to manage and improve the network of alleyways across the city.

The funding will support council to redesign a core service using innovative, community-driven approaches and use these public spaces as a testbed for a new, scalable model of community service delivery.

Selected from more than 630 applications worldwide and 50 global finalists, Belfast is among a cohort of cities representing 20 countries and more than 35 million residents.

This follows extensive community engagement carried out during the Bloomberg-supported development phase, including an online survey, conversational AI agent presented as a wheelie bin and a series of face-to-face engagement sessions. These conversations confirmed strong public interest in being more involved in shaping and caring for shared spaces close to home, while recognising that every alleyway, and every community need is



different.

Belfast's proposal will focus on redesigning how the council and communities collaborate and will introduce new tools and mechanisms such as local resource hubs, using recycled materials, digital and data tools, and small grants to support resident-led action. Together, these elements aim to move away from reactive responses toward a more sustainable way of maintaining alleyways.

Michael R. Bloomberg, founder of Bloomberg Philanthropies and Bloomberg L.P., and three-term mayor of New York City, said: "The most effective city halls are bold, creative, and proactive in solving problems and meeting residents' needs, and we launched the Mayors Challenge to help more of them succeed."

"We look forward to supporting this year's 24 winners as they bring

their innovative projects to life and to seeing their ideas spread to more cities around the world."

If you live near an alleyway and would like it to be considered as part of the Bloomberg-funded project, visit the Alleyways page on the council website for more information.

To learn more about the 50 finalist proposals, visit the Bloomberg Philanthropies Mayor's Challenge website.



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ROYAL COLLEGE REGISTRAR VISIT TO ULSTER HOSPITAL

The South Eastern Trust was honoured to host a visit from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, Registrar, Dr Jan Dudley, to the Paediatric and Neonatal Units at the Ulster Hospital.

During the visit, Dr Dudley toured the Children's Outpatients Unit, Short Stay Paediatric Assessment Unit, Inpatient Wards, Day Procedure Unit and the Neonatal Unit, meeting with clinical teams and learning more about the services provided to children and young people across the South Eastern Trust area.

Welcoming Dr Dudley to the Unit were Assistant Director of Acute Paediatrics and Clinical Support Services, Kieran Quinn, Associate Clinical Director for Paediatrics and Consultant Paediatrician, Dr Karen Courtenay

and Consultant Paediatrician, Dr Naomi Kirk. Dr Dudley was joined by colleagues from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health during the visit.

The aim of the visit was to gain first-hand insight into Paediatric Services in Northern Ireland, to understand the challenges facing frontline teams and to explore how the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health can further support Paediatricians in delivering high-quality care to children and families.

Speaking during the visit, Dr Dudley said, "It is fantastic to be here in Belfast to see

what Paediatricians across the United Kingdom are doing for their communities and populations. We will be talking throughout the day about what we at the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health can do to help Paediatricians achieve those aims.

"It is really important to get first-hand experience of what is happening at ground level and to understand the challenges which we know exist across the whole of the United Kingdom. While those challenges may present in different ways, coming together to see what we can do to address them is incredibly important."

Kieran Quinn added, "It is great to have the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health here today to visit our facilities, speak with our clinical teams and see some of the excellent work they do for our children and young people. Children make up 25 per cent of the population and it is vital that they have strong representation and advocacy. Our Teams are passionate advocates for Service Users under the age of 16 and are committed to delivering the highest standards of care."

Thanking the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health for attending, Dr



Karen Courtenay stated, "It has been an absolute pleasure to host colleagues from the Royal College of Paediatrics and

Child Health. The visit has given us the opportunity to highlight both the excellent work taking place here at the

Ulster Hospital and the challenges we face in Northern Ireland. We look forward to continued engagement with the Royal College

of Paediatrics and Child Health as we advocate for the wellbeing of children and young people in our community."

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THE SCIENCE BEHIND EVERY BREATH

Respiratory and Sleep Physiologists at the South Eastern Trust recently highlighted the science behind breathing as part of Healthcare Science Week, showcasing the vital role they play in diagnosing and treating respiratory conditions.

Based at the Ulster Hospital, the Team of Physiologists used the

week to raise awareness of their work and to recognise the important contribution Healthcare Scientists make behind the scenes, in supporting patient care, and inspiring the next generation to consider careers in Healthcare Science.

Respiratory Physiologists carry out a wide range of specialist tests and treatments, including lung function testing and the diagnosis and management of Obstructive Sleep Apnoea. Respiratory

Physiologists are the core of respiratory medicine.

South Eastern Trust, Respiratory Physiologist, Coral Trainor explained that much of the Team's work takes place in the Pulmonary Function Laboratory at the Ulster Hospital. Coral said, "We carry out lung function testing and assess patients for conditions such as Obstructive Sleep Apnoea.

"Within the Pulmonary Function Laboratory, we focus on how the lungs



South Eastern Trust, Respiratory Physiologist, Coral Trainor and Ulster University, Respiratory Physiologist Student, Hope McBride and Senior Respiratory Physiologist Kieran O'Brien.

are working and their capacity. We perform a series of breathing tests that help us understand what is happening with a patient's lung function. We can measure lung volumes and assess how effectively oxygen

is transferred into the blood." The Team also supports a growing number of patients with Obstructive Sleep Apnoea, a condition that continues to increase year on year. Ulster University,

Respiratory Physiologist Student, Hope McBride said, "I chose this course because it combines scientific knowledge with direct patient care, which I love. I really enjoy interacting with patients."

"It is a very rewarding job because we work closely with patients and the tests we perform help guide their diagnosis and treatment decisions. "This career path is rewarding, it is so interesting. If you enjoy science and working with people, this role allows you to do both. I would definitely encourage anyone interested in Healthcare Science to consider this pathway."

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Community and creative grant launched to help shape Belfast Stories

Belfast City Council is inviting Belfast-based community and cultural organisations to apply for funding through the new Belfast Stories Community Grants Programme - a £250,000 initiative to support story-based projects across the city.

The Programme will offer ten small grants of up to £10,000, and five creative project grants of up to £30,000, to support initiatives across a broad range of creative fields that explore cultural identity, heritage and creativity through storytelling. Applications open today, Thursday 19 February 2026 and close at 4pm on Tuesday 14 April 2026, with projects anticipated to run between June 2026 and March 2027.



Belfast Stories, the flagship Belfast Region City Deal tourism and regeneration project, is expected to open by 2030 at the Art Deco former Bank of Ireland building and the surrounding 5,000 square metre site on the corner of Royal Avenue and North Street. Described as a public space, visitor attraction and creative hub, the multi-purpose destination is anticipated to attract more than 700,000 visitors per year.

Central to the project is a commitment to support communities to tell their own stories across the city, as well as creating opportunities for people to

discover new stories.

Lord Mayor of Belfast, Councillor Tracy Kelly said, "Belfast Stories is an ambitious project that is rooted in celebrating the people of Belfast and preserving the stories and experiences that connect them to this place. This grants programme creates meaningful ways for people to share their stories, whilst ensuring that Belfast Stories will be inclusive and representative of the many communities that make up our city."

Groups are encouraged to develop projects that get local people involved

in gathering, sharing or creatively responding to stories connected to their community.

Wendy Langham, Programme Director of Belfast Stories, said, "This grants programme brings momentum to Belfast Stories. It allows us to connect with community groups and leverage the power of creativity to unlock stories, memories and experiences of an authentic Belfast. Communities have an important role to play in the future of the Belfast Stories project, and we recognise that the Belfast Stories building will be

part of a rich network of storytelling across the city."

Information sessions will take place across the city and online in late February and early March. For guidance and application details, email belfaststories@belfastcity.gov.uk or visit www.belfastcity.gov.uk/funding

Earlier this month, a pre-application Community Consultation, sharing updated proposals and designs for public comment, was completed in advance of a planning application being submitted later this year.

Follow Belfast Stories on Instagram @belfast_stories

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WHAT WE CAN ALL DO FOR HEDGEHOGS.

As their name indicates, hedgehogs mostly live in or around hedges, and that has been their downfall, as rural hedges have been increasingly removed to accommodate intensive agriculture.

It's estimated that hedgehog numbers in farmland have fallen by more than 50% in the last 20 years. While they have been adaptable by occupying urban and suburban gardens and parks, even there their numbers are declining.



Anybody with a garden can help.

First, if you have a hedge, please don't remove it and replace it with a fence. I know it can be a bit of a chore to trim, but hedges are not just useful to hedgehogs, they are shelters and nesting places for other wildlife, particularly birds.

Hedgehogs travel about a mile every night to find food, being the gardener's friend by gobbling up slugs and insects, and if they're blocked by fences, then, inevitably, they will die. So, if you must have fences, just do one simple thing: leave a small, roughly 13cm x 13cm (5" x 5"), gap at

the bottom of them. You can even get hedgehog highway signage to display over the gaps. And why not encourage your neighbours to do the same and create a really useful hedgehog-friendly habitat?

Second, leave some areas of lawn or garden to simply grow, revealing native grasses and other plants, including

wildflowers (which will also help bees and other insects). A scrubby corner could be hedgehog paradise!

Third, stop using slug pellets, which not only kill hedgehog prey, but the hedgehogs themselves. If you're lucky to have garden hedgehogs they'll happily deal with the slugs.

Finally, if you have

a suitably dense hedge (even under those pesky leylandii!), why not buy or make a hedgehog home: <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/actions/how-build-hedgehog-home>

Think about what you can do. You'll make Beatrix Potter's Mrs Tiggy-Winkle happy and be doing your bit for wildlife recovery.

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New Specialist Clinic Offers Relief for those with Joint Pain

For many suffering from chronic joint pain or musculoskeletal injuries, the path to relief is often obstructed by long waiting lists and a "one-size-fits-all" approach to care.

However, a new specialist practice is changing that landscape. NI Steroid Injection, led by Dr. McQuillan (MBChB), has officially launched to provide professional, affordable and rapid-access treatment for patients from across Greater Belfast and beyond.

Dr. McQuillan is an experienced General Practitioner with a robust clinical background. Before specializing in musculoskeletal medicine, Dr. McQuillan spent seven years working in high-pressure hospital environments across several specialities, including Acute Medicine, Geriatrics, Respiratory and Cardiology.

A Member of the Royal College of

General Practitioners, he has developed a deep expertise in the mechanics of joint inflammation and healing. His philosophy centers on community-based care; he has teamed up with Marie Hart Physiotherapy to ensure that medical intervention is paired with physical rehabilitation. Dr. McQuillan has also introduced a home-visit service for patients with limited mobility, ensuring that specialist care—including ultrasound-guided treatments—is accessible even to those unable to leave their houses.

What sets this new practice apart is its integration of "Point of Care" ultrasound. While many clinics rely solely on anatomical landmarks,

Dr. McQuillan utilizes imaging to visualize the exact source of pain, such as the median nerve in Carpal Tunnel Syndrome or excess fluid in the knee. This precision ensures the steroid solution is deposited exactly where it is needed, significantly enhancing patient outcomes and reducing the recovery time for conditions like Osteoarthritis, Rotator Cuff pain and Bursitis.

As a new addition to the Northern Ireland healthcare sector, NI Steroid Injection represents a shift toward more agile, specialized private practices that prioritize patient convenience without sacrificing clinical excellence. For those tired of waiting, the clinic offers a



streamlined journey from diagnosis to relief, all under the guidance of a practitioner with a comprehensive understanding of both general and specialized medicine.

For more information see <https://nisteroidinjection.com>

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BRITISH PET PARENTS STRUGGLING TO COVER COST OF RISING VET BILLS

One-in-three UK pet parents delay or skip vet treatment because of high costs.

Majority of dog and cat owners support an end to postcode pricing at vets

Jollyes, the UK's leading value pet retailer, offers major savings on core vet services such as vaccinations and microchipping, making high quality pet care available to all

As the UK's leading value pet retailer Jollyes Pets, today released new research that laid bare the concern felt by pet parents about the cost of rising vet services.

In a survey conducted last week by OnePoll[2] on behalf of Jollyes Pets, almost one-in-three (30 per cent) pet parents said they'd delayed or skipped treatment for their pet because of rising vet prices.

And almost a quarter (25 per cent) said they'd sacrificed something they wanted so they could cover a vet's bill.

What's more over six-in-ten (63 per cent) of UK dog and cat owners said vets should offer consistent national pricing for the services they provide.

And according to the survey, 92 per cent of pet parents want vets to follow Jollyes' lead and introduce nationwide prices and transparent marketing, clearly putting costs on display in vet clinics and on their websites.

Jollyes Pets is committed to making high-quality pet care a right for all, not a privilege for the few.

That's why prices at Jollyes' vet clinics are at the same low prices nationwide, with none of the local price



variations that other big vet groups apply.

A two-course vaccination for a new puppy or kitten is just £55.00 at any Jollyes vet clinic and a booster vaccination for either a dog or cat, is a flat £35.00.

Chipping a dog or cat at is £20.00 at Jollyes Pets and a combined first vaccination course and microchip is £68.00.

Jollyes Pets chief executive officer-designate Adam Dury said:

"It's clear pet parents across the UK are really struggling to fund vet bills that have exploded over the past five years.

"While our vet clinics offer simple services such as vaccines and microchipping, those services cover nine in ten visits to a vet – with significant savings.

"As our survey shows, customers want prices transparency and lower prices with the same price from one end of the country

to the other.

"That's why we're focused on opening more stores to provide communities access to lower vet clinic prices for the services they need."

The vet market is dominated by six large veterinary groups, that control 60 per cent of the market and Jollyes Pets offers a low-cost, high-quality alternative for services such as vaccinations and microchipping that's the price leader, over 40 per cent better value.

In the next two months, regulation is expected that will improve price transparency in the £6.3bn sector that, according to the Office for National Statistics has seen cost of taking pets to the vet rise by almost 50 per cent since 2020.

Across its 73 vet clinics nationwide, Jollyes now offers over 20,000 hours of appointment time with

Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) vets – an increase of 9.3 per cent on the previous year and has over 100 trained colleagues (SQP) licensed to offer advice on over-the-counter medicines.

Bookings can also now be made online with fully trained Royal Veterinary College-accredited vets who work with long-term sector experts from Eville & Jones.

Over the past three years Jollyes has almost doubled the number of stores across the UK, becoming a clear challenger brand in the UK pet retail market.

Earlier this month Jollyes released strong trading results that demonstrated how significant rises in food and vet bills over the year were impacting household budgets.

In late 2025 the RSPCA reported pet abandonment and neglect cases were at a five-year high because of these economic concerns.

Hinch Single Malt Irish Whiskey named Best Irish Small Batch Single Malt

Hinch Irish Whiskey Single Malt was named Best Irish Small Batch Single Malt at the World Whiskies Awards Ireland 2026, a significant recognition that follows Emma Millar's recent promotion to Head Distiller and reflects her influence on the development and character of the award-winning liquid.

Emma, who has been part of the Hinch Distillery team since its inception in 2020, has played a central role in developing and shaping the character of the Single Malt, working closely on its maturation journey in ex-bourbon American oak and Oloroso sherry casks to create a finely balanced expression with notes of orange, honey and ginger.

The award represents an important milestone both for Hinch Distillery and for Emma in her new leadership role, highlighting the craft and consistency behind the liquid.

The awards were announced at a ceremony held at the InterContinental Dublin on 26 February 2026, bringing together leading figures from across the Irish whiskey industry to celebrate the year's achievements.

Emma Millar, Head Distiller at Hinch



Distillery, said:

"This award reflects the care and attention that goes into every stage of our whiskey making process. Having worked closely with the Single Malt over the past five years, it is especially rewarding to see it recognised in this way so soon after stepping into the role of Head Distiller. It highlights

the importance of understanding the influence of cask maturation and allowing each whiskey to develop its own character over time."

Hinch's 15 Year Old Sherry Cask Finish was also named Best Irish Blended Limited Release (13 to 20 Years), while the distillery's 5 Year Old Double Wood

Madeira Cask Finish was recognised as a Category Winner in the 12 Years and Under section.

Winners of the World Whiskies Awards Ireland will go on to compete for the title of World's Best in their category, with the results to be announced at the World Whiskies Awards 2026 Global Dinner on 25 March 2026.

“Planting the seeds of hope across Northern Ireland”

The Phoenix Energy Belfast City Marathon is proud to shine a spotlight on charities making a real difference across Northern Ireland, and recently spotlighted PIPS Suicide Prevention Ireland, a leading mental health and suicide prevention charity supporting individuals, families, and communities in crisis.

Founded in 2003, PIPS Suicide Prevention Ireland has grown to become a leading suicide prevention charity and is now also a founding partner of the National Suicide Prevention Network, in conjunction with The Royal Foundation of The Prince and Princess of Wales. With locations across the region, PIPS Charity delivers a wide range of services including crisis intervention, counselling, advocacy, community outreach, befriending support, and children and young people's services in Belfast for those aged 4-18 – ensuring people can access help when they need it most.

PIPS Charity also operates a Friday night crisis helpline, providing vital support when other services may be unavailable, alongside crisis walk-in support at its Belfast offices during

opening hours, offering immediate, face-to-face help for those in distress.

At the heart of PIPS Charity's work is its mission of striving for a compassionate society free from suicide. Guided by this purpose, the charity supports thousands of people each year through some of the most difficult moments of their lives, providing professional, empathetic, and life-saving care.

Alongside frontline services, PIPS Charity plays a strong role in advocacy and public campaigning. Their recent campaign, "Too Many Lives Lost to Suicide," calls on government to fully fund Northern Ireland's mental health strategy following the publication of statistics showing 290 registered suicide deaths in 2024. The campaign highlights the urgent need for sustained

investment in prevention, early intervention, and crisis services to help save lives.

PIPS Charity's work extends beyond immediate crisis support alone. The charity partners with schools, workplaces, sporting organisations and community groups to deliver education, training and awareness programmes, helping to reduce stigma around mental health and suicide while building resilience across communities.

As a charity that is non-government funded and relies heavily on fundraising and donations to maintain its services, PIPS Charity depends on the generosity of individuals, businesses and the wider community to continue delivering vital support across Northern Ireland.

When runners choose to fundraise for PIPS Charity

through the Phoenix Energy Belfast City Marathon, they are helping to ensure that people in crisis can access professional care, families can receive support through bereavement, and communities can be strengthened through prevention and education – creating lasting change and hope for the future.

Those wishing to support PIPS Charity's advocacy work can sign the charity's petition calling for full funding of the mental health strategy here:

Sign the petition here: <https://c.org/8yFY7jVvDZ>

To learn more about PIPS Suicide Prevention Ireland, visit their website: <https://pipscharity.com>

To register your interest in running for PIPS Charity at the Phoenix Energy Belfast City Marathon and Team Relay 2026, please visit the Belfast City Marathon website charity tab.

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Certsure Property Services: Your Partner in Property Compliance

In the fast-evolving landscape of the local property market, staying compliant with ever-changing safety regulations can be a daunting task for landlords and letting agents.

Certsure Property Services is a leading solution, providing a comprehensive “one-stop-shop” for property certification and safety requirements across the country.

A History of Reliability Certsure Property Services was founded with a clear mission: to simplify the complex world of property compliance. Recognizing that property owners often struggled to coordinate multiple contractors for different safety checks, the company established itself as a centralized hub for legal certifications. Over the years, they have built a robust network of qualified engineers and accredited assessors, growing from a regional provider into a trusted nationwide partner known for professionalism and

efficiency.

Comprehensive Service Offerings The company specializes in ensuring that residential and commercial properties meet all statutory requirements. Their core services include:

- Electrical Installation Condition Reports (EICR): Ensuring fixed electrical installations are safe and compliant with current standards.

- Gas Safety Certificates (CP12): Mandatory annual inspections for gas appliances and flues.

- Energy Performance Certificates (EPC): Assessing energy efficiency to meet legal rental standards.

- Legionella risk assessment.

- Fire Safety & Alarms: Professional installation and maintenance of smoke, heat, and carbon monoxide detectors to

protect inhabitants.

What Customers Say The company’s dedication to customer service is reflected in their feedback. One satisfied landlord, Sarah M., recently shared:

“I’ve used Certsure for my entire portfolio. They handle the EICRs and Gas Safety checks seamlessly, and their booking system is incredibly efficient. It’s a huge relief to know my properties are legal and my tenants are safe without having to chase multiple tradespeople.”

By combining technical expertise with a customer-centric approach, Certsure Property Services continues to set the standard for property safety management in the UK. For more information, visit certsureproperty.services.

TRUST CANCER TEAM HELPS PARENTS NAVIGATE CANCER CONVERSATIONS WITH CHILDREN

Receiving a Cancer diagnosis can be life-changing.

One of the most challenging issues for parents is finding the right way to explain the diagnosis and what lies ahead to their entire family, particularly children.

To mark World Cancer Day, staff at the South Eastern Trust’s Macmillan Cancer Unit are highlighting the support available to help families navigate these difficult but vital conversations.

South Eastern Trust, Haematology/Adolescent and Young Adult Clinical Nurse Specialist in the Macmillan Cancer Unit, Lisa Callender explained how the Team provides guidance, support and signposting to parents faced with the prospect of explaining a cancer diagnosis to their children.

“As we mark World Cancer Day, it is important to remember that Cancer does not just affect the patient, it also affects their families, including children, young people and Grandparents.

“It is important to remember that children and young people are always listening and always picking up subtle clues. It is not always what you say but how you say it. We would encourage patients to explain what their diagnosis is and how this is going to

impact them going forward.”

Lisa stressed the importance of honesty when explaining a Cancer diagnosis to a child or young person. “Children do not tend to live in shades of grey, they see things in black and white. They respond much better when you are honest with them. The best place for a child or young person to get information is from the people they trust and love the most, their parents or carers.”

One of the many things a Cancer diagnosis brings is uncertainty. Lisa emphasised the importance of helping children understand what to expect. “It is important for children to know that Mummy or Daddy may go through some difficult times. Their appearance might change, they may be feeling very sick and have less energy, but they haven’t changed who they are. They are still Mummy, they are still Daddy. They are still the person that brought you into this world. They are the person who got on their hands and knees and played with you or chased you around the park. They might not be able to do that as well as they have done in the past but they are still here and will want to do that again in the future.”

Macmillan Health and Wellbeing Co-ordinator, Karen Kelly highlighted the role of the Support Centre within the Unit, which provides a wide range of information and practical help for families. “Receiving a Cancer diagnosis can be incredibly challenging on a personal level. It is not a standalone experience, it affects the people closest to you and those you love most.

“It is not uncommon for us to meet people who are overwhelmed by the thought of having that conversation with their children. Parents are often very aware of how a child might cope with the diagnosis and how it could affect the whole family.”



Karen explained that the Unit recognises how crucial it is for families to receive the right support at the right time. “We can offer parents

the opportunity to bring their children into the Unit, show them around and help them understand where Mum and Dad are going to be. This can help reduce fear of the unknown and make the experience less daunting.”

Karen continued, “We talk to parents about the importance of being open with their children. Many parents want to be honest but often struggle to find the words and they just appreciate a little bit of guidance.

“We provide literature and booklets which help parents begin those conversations in a way that is appropriate for the child or young person. When it comes to a Cancer diagnosis, it’s not always what you say, it is how you say it. We encourage the use of plain language and

avoiding sugar coating the situation.

Karen encouraged anyone with concerns about talking to their children about a cancer diagnosis to reach out for support. “There is so much we can do to help both you and your family. We can provide information, practical tools and guide families to professionals with expertise in supporting children and young people through this experience.

“We all know that children can pick up so much and they can become very aware when they feel something is being hidden from them. When parents whisper, children listen harder. Being clear and honest from the beginning helps children feel included and makes them feel safe, knowing they understand what is happening.”

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Planning a city break in Glasgow? Skip the airport queues and travel stress and choose the Belfast-Glasgow Express with HANNON Coach & Sail—a comfortable, hassle-free way to reach the heart of Scotland’s largest city.

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Glasgow is a vibrant, stylish city with something for everyone. From world-class culture and nightlife to outstanding restaurants and bars, it’s a destination that never disappoints. Shoppers are particularly well catered for—Glasgow is widely recognised as the UK’s top shopping destination outside London, with its famous ‘Style Mile’ offering unbeatable retail therapy.

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Belfast-Glasgow Express delivers outstanding value. With no hidden costs and flexible travel options, passengers can pick and mix dates and times to suit their plans—making it ideal for a spontaneous spring getaway or a longer city break.

The service operates twice daily from Belfast Grand Central Station (Stand 18)

and drops passengers at Glasgow Buchanan Bus Station, close to the Style Mile and a wide range of excellent city-centre hotels.

Company Director Aodh Hannon says the service’s popularity comes down to convenience and simplicity.

“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.”

Bookings can be made online at www.hannoncoach.com, or by phone through HANNON’s friendly booking team on 028 9265 0700 (Monday-Friday).

From the Ards Peninsula to the Freezer: The Glastry Farm Story

Located in the lush, rolling landscapes of the Ards Peninsula in County Down, Glastry Farm is a testament to nearly 170 years of agricultural excellence.

Since 1856, the Taylor family has served as stewards of this land, tending to a pedigree dairy herd that produces some of the most exceptional milk in Northern Ireland. Today, that heritage is preserved through a “farm-to-freezer” philosophy, where the journey from the milking parlour to the processing plant is measured in meters rather than miles. This fully integrated approach ensures total control over the source, resulting in a premium product that honours the family’s deep-rooted history.

The award-winning ice cream produced at Glastry Farm is defined by its uncompromising purity and texture. By utilizing a unique manufacturing process that incorporates minimal air, the farm achieves a richer, creamier consistency than standard commercial brands. Every scoop is a reflection of

the farm’s high standards, containing more than 70% pure dairy milk and relying on locally sourced ingredients wherever possible to maintain a low carbon footprint. This dedication to quality is matched by a commitment to inclusivity; the entire facility is a strictly nut-free site, and the majority of the range is gluten-free, ensuring that these indulgent desserts can be enjoyed by a wide audience.

Innovation at Glastry Farm has recently expanded into the plant-based sector with a market-leading sorbet range that challenges traditional expectations. Unlike typical water-based sorbets that can feel icy or thin, Glastry’s range utilizes advanced technology and the highest fruit content in the sector to achieve a remarkably creamy, ice-cream-like texture. These sorbets are not only vegan



and low in fat but are also designed with modern health consciousness in mind. They feature lower sugar levels and high fibre content, while being naturally enhanced with antioxidants and omega-3.

Ultimately, Glastry Farm represents a perfect marriage of Victorian-era tradition and 21st-century sustainability. Every aspect of the business is built on a

sustainable concept, from the way the pedigree herd is managed to the eco-friendly “farm-to-freezer” logistics. By combining high-quality primary production with sophisticated manufacturing, the Taylor family continues to lead the market, proving that the finest treats are those made with transparency, care, and a genuine connection to the land.



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Specsavers Connswater celebrates 25 years of Style in East Belfast

This spring, Specsavers Connswater and its team of local experts will be celebrating 25 years of business in style!

Store partners, Paula Cunningham and Lynsey Caldwell lead the team who all hail from the Belfast area, and have built a reputation not only for clinical expertise, but for warm welcomes and community spirit.

This spring also marks two years since they relocated from Connswater Shopping Centre into a new premises within the retail park, beside Ulster Bank and McDonalds, marking a £650,000 investment, committing even more care for the local community, providing tailored advice, early detection support and ongoing aftercare.

Ophthalmic Director, Paula Cunningham commented; "We are really excited to mark 25 years of our practice, and are very proud of the accessible eye and hearing care we bring to east Belfast and beyond, including comprehensive eye testing, hearing care clinics and wax removal



clinics, alongside a range of designer frames."

Dispensing Director, Lynsey Caldwell added; "Spring is the perfect time to celebrate, coming out of winter as the sun makes a reappearance. It's this time of year that we often see customers looking for a new style, and of course, choose some new frames for their prescription sunglasses."

Whether you're drawn

to bold, statement silhouettes, or sleek, minimalist lines, Specsavers Connswater carries lines from Tommy Hilfiger, Kylie Minogue, Marc Jacobs and Karen Millen, alongside exclusive collections from partnerships with Elton John and Millie Bobbie Brown.

Paula finished; "A quarter of a century on, the whole team at

Specsavers Connswater remains proud to serve East Belfast and develop our services to suit our local customers. We combine clinical excellence with contemporary style, providing accessibility and value, which we will continue for years to come!"

Specsavers Connswater is open seven days a week, with late opening on Thursdays.

SPRING HOME TREND FOR SOULFUL SANCTUARY

As we lean into the bloom of 2026, the era of "stark minimalism" and "sad beiges" has officially been retired.

This spring, home design is moving towards what experts are calling the "Soulful Sanctuary"—a thoughtful blend of high-tech wellness, raw natural textures, and a heavy dose of personal character. If you are looking to refresh your space this season, the shift is away from clinical perfection and towards environments that feel layered, lived-in, and restorative.

The Colour Story: Mineral Greens and Luminous Teals

The palette for Spring 2026 is grounded in nature but carries a distinct, digital edge. While previous years leaned heavily on sugary pastels, this season prioritises depth and energy. Transformative Teal has emerged as the defining shade of the year, acting as a blue-green hybrid that balances biological calm with technological progress.

We are seeing this used boldly on kitchen cabinetry and velvet upholstery, often paired with dusty mineral greens and soft mints that serve as the new neutrals. To brighten the mood, designers are layering in Celestial Yellow accents, which mimic the soft, energising glow of early morning spring sunlight without

feeling overwhelming.

The Lace Revival and Modern Heirloom Textiles

In a surprising turn towards a more traditional aesthetic, lace has become the breakout textile for 2026. However, this is not a return to your grandmother's fussy doilies; it is being reinterpreted through a modern, minimalist lens known as "pared-back intentionality." This trend manifests in layered linens and bedding featuring delicate broderie-trimmed edges or oversized lace patterns. When used against sleek, contemporary furniture, these textiles filter the spring light into intricate patterns across the floor, adding a sense of soft, curated nostalgia to otherwise modern rooms.

Biophilia 2.0: Integrated Nature and Wellness

We have moved far beyond simply placing a potted plant in a corner. Spring 2026 is defined by integrated nature, where the outdoors is built directly into the home's infrastructure. Living walls and moss art are increasingly popular in transitional spaces like hallways and bathrooms, while smart circadian lighting systems have



become a standard feature for home wellness. These systems automatically adjust the colour temperature of a room to match the natural cycle of the sun, helping to regulate sleep and mood as the days grow longer. This focus on "honesty" extends to materials as well, with furniture crafted from unrefined timber, agave fibres, and innovative coffee-ground composites.

Stealth Tech: The Invisible Home

By 2026, the ultimate luxury in home technology is its invisibility. The goal for the spring "clean-up" is to remove visual clutter, which has led to the rise of Stone Tech. Wireless

charging capabilities are now being seamlessly integrated directly into stone countertops and wooden side tables, making tangled cables a thing of the past. Similarly, televisions are being replaced by "immersive murals" or screens that roll away entirely when not in use, ensuring that the technology in your home is felt through convenience but rarely seen as a distraction.

A Quick Tip for the Season: If you aren't ready for a full renovation, try swapping your hardware. Replacing polished brass with sanded stainless steel or brushed chrome is one of the fastest ways to bring a room into 2026.

Best places for a walk in and around Belfast

Belfast is a city that doesn't just sit in a valley; it practically hugs the hills and rivers that surround it.

Whether you're looking to burn off a Saturday morning fry or just want to see the city from a "Gulliver-sized" perspective, there's a trail for you. From rugged mountain peaks to tranquil riverside paths, the city offers a surprising variety of terrain for anyone looking to get some fresh air.

Cave Hill Country Park

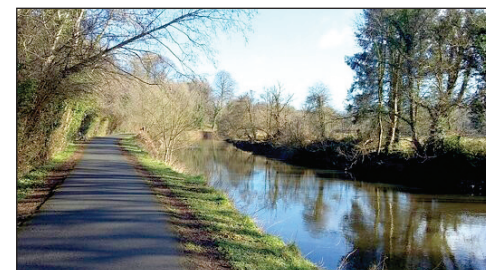
Often called the "Sleeping Giant" because the silhouette of the hill looks like a reclining figure, Cave Hill is arguably Belfast's most iconic landmark. It's rumored to have inspired Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels, and it is easy to see why when you are standing at McArt's Fort.

This ancient stone fort sits on a cliff edge nearly 368 meters above sea level, and on a clear day, you can see all the way across the water to Scotland.

Most walkers begin their journey at Belfast Castle, where you can grab a coffee in the castle cellar before starting the climb. It is a challenging, steep pull that requires decent boots, but the panoramic views of the shipyards and the lough make every step worth it.

Divis and the Black Mountain

If Cave Hill is the Sleeping Giant, Divis and the Black Mountain represent the city's rugged crown. Managed by the National Trust, this site offers a wilder, more wind-swept moorland experience



than the manicured city parks. The Ridge Trail is the standout here—a 4.2-mile loop that offers a 360-degree view of Northern Ireland. From one vantage point, you can spot the Mourne Mountains, Lough Neagh, and the bustling city docks.

The paths here are generally well-graveled, but the area is very exposed to the elements, so it's best to check the weather before heading up. After your walk, the Divis Coffee Barn is a must-visit; it is the highest coffee shop in Ireland and the perfect place for a post-walk traybake.

The Lagan Towpath

For those who prefer a horizontal challenge over a vertical one, the Lagan Towpath is a tranquil escape that follows the river and the old 18th-century canal system. It is a peaceful stretch of greenery where you are likely to see herons fishing in the shallows and the occasional rower gliding past. The quintessential Belfast Sunday stroll usually runs from Stranmillis toward Shaw's

Bridge and the Lock Keeper's Inn.

Because the entire route is flat and paved, it is ideal for families, cyclists, and anyone looking for a meditative "dander" without the heavy breathing involved in a hill climb. It's a great way to see the softer, greener side of the city's industrial history.

Stormont Estate

Walking through the gates of Stormont feels grand, and for good reason—it is the seat of the Northern Ireland Assembly. However, beyond the politics, the grounds are immaculately kept and surprisingly varied. The main draw is the Prince of Wales Avenue, a mile-long climb toward the Parliament Buildings that serves as a rite of passage for local walkers.

While most paths are easy to navigate, they can get a bit mucky after the classic Belfast rain, so it's worth wearing sturdy shoes to tackle the forest floor. Whether you are there for a quiet walk or to try out the world-class zip lines, it's one of the city's most versatile outdoor spaces.



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TURNING OLD INTO GOLD: HOW ROBINSON GOLDSMITHS ARE REDESIGNING HEIRLOOMS SUSTAINABLY

What do you do with a broken chain that belonged to your mum? Or a gold ring that's not your style but holds a lifetime of family stories?



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This isn't just recycling. It's memory-making, reborn.

In their family-run workshop, old jewellery is given a second life through a thoughtful and skilled process. The gold is melted down - a mesmerising sight - not to erase its past, but to prepare it for a new chapter.

"Working with customers to design and create unique jewellery is a real privilege," says Jennifer Robinson, partner at Robinson Goldsmiths. "Often, inherited jewellery is just sitting in a box somewhere, unseen and unused, as it's not the right style or size. By using these items to create something new, the customer gets a custom piece of jewellery which is all the more special knowing the history behind it."

Once molten, the gold is poured into a mould, cooled, then carefully rolled, shaped, and crafted into something entirely fresh.

Whether it becomes a sleek new ring, a modern pendant, or a bespoke design co-created with the team, each piece is reimagined but still deeply rooted in your story.

"Over the years we've turned broken and unloved jewellery into rings, necklaces and brooches," adds Gillian Robinson, shop manager. "These pieces are lovingly designed and created in our workshop from our family to another. By reusing these precious metals and stones, we're also offering a sustainable option for eco-conscious shoppers."

This is sustainable jewellery at its most meaningful: no new mining, no waste just precious materials already rich with history, transformed into something you'll wear every day and perhaps pass on one day yourself.

So if there's old gold tucked away in a drawer, maybe it's time to bring it in, melt it down, and start a new chapter.

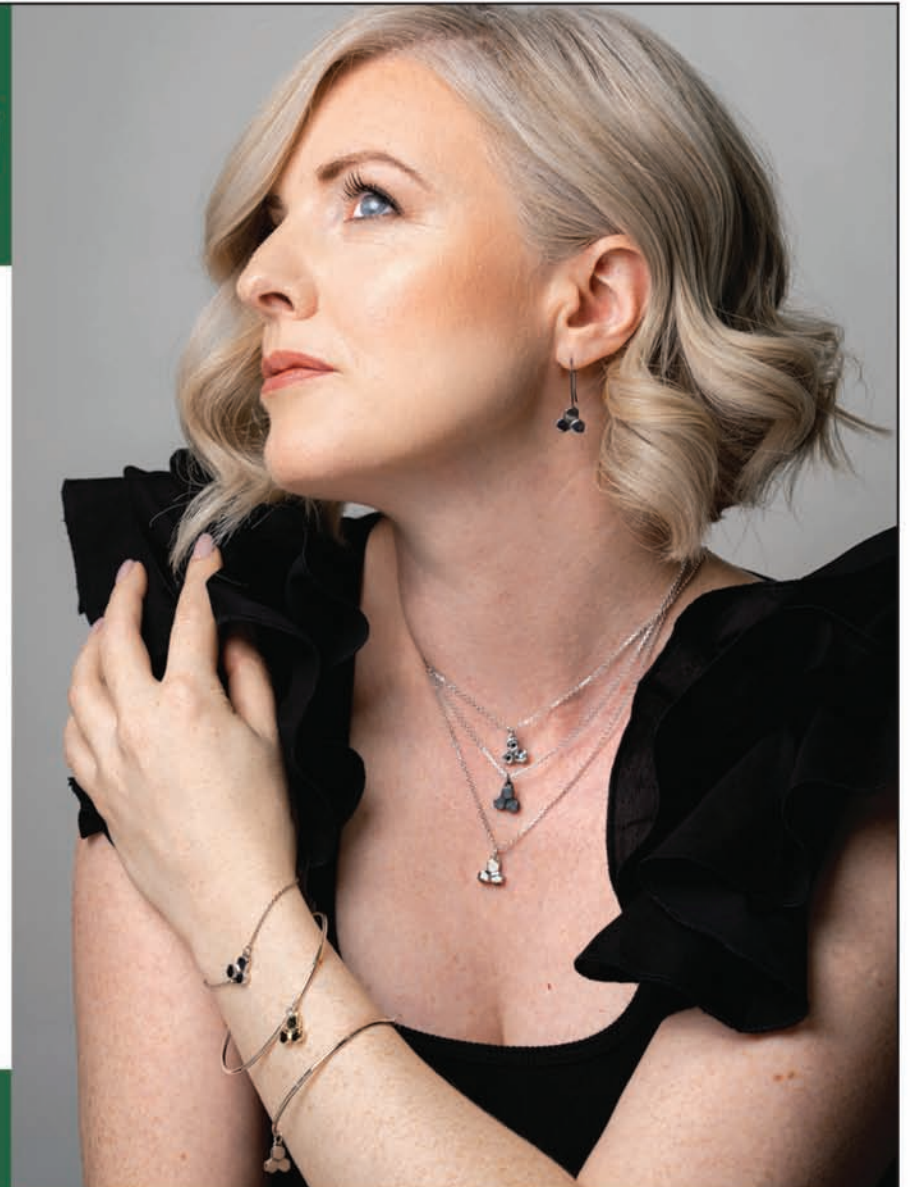


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NEW PODIATRY CLINIC NOW OPEN IN HOLYWOOD

Claire Badger is the fully qualified Podiatrist at The Foot Doc having graduated from Glasgow Caledonian University in 2019.

Claire has over six years of clinical experience in foot health and lower limb care, she spent the first five years of her career working within the Northern Health & Social Care Trust. This time in the NHS provided her with extensive exposure to complex cases and high-risk foot conditions,

giving her a solid foundation in medical-grade podiatry. Claire opened The Foot Doc earlier this month with a new clinic on High Street and also offering a mobile service! Says Claire, "I established The Foot Doc to bring that same level of professional rigour to a local,

community-focused clinic. My goal is simple: to help people maintain their independence and live pain-free lives through expert care. Every set of feet is unique. Whether you are visiting for a routine check-up or a complex injury, I ensure every treatment plan is evidence-based and fully personalised to your lifestyle. I take the time to listen to your concerns, diagnose the root cause, and explain your treatment options clearly."

Whether you are managing the daily wear and tear of life or navigating a specific injury, the clinic's philosophy centres on a patient-focused, tailored approach within a supportive and discreet environment. Their General Podiatry services address common but often painful issues such as nail cutting, ingrown toenails, hard skin, callus, and verruca



removal. For patients suffering from more complex conditions like persistent heel pain, flat feet, or sports-related injuries, the clinic provides in-depth Biomechanical Assessments. These evaluations allow the podiatrist to diagnose the root cause of discomfort and implement long-term solutions that go beyond surface-level symptoms. The Foot Doc also provides a dedicated mobile service every Tuesday, offering house

visits to patients across East Belfast, Dundonald, Holywood, and the surrounding areas. Taking the first step toward better foot health is designed to be as seamless as possible. Patients can easily book an appointment by visiting the official website, emailing the clinic, or calling their Holywood office. 53B High Street, Holywood, BT18 9AB, Tel: 07923 068 528; Email: info@thefootdoc.co.uk www.thefootdoc.co.uk

Advanced Glaucoma Care in the heart of Royal Hillsborough: Glaucoma Laser

A new service has been launched in Affidea Hillsborough Private Clinic to help patients suffering from Glaucoma, under the care of Mr Jonathan Bonnar, Consultant Ophthalmic Surgeon with a Specialist interest in Advanced Cataract and Glaucoma Surgery.

Proven Benefits of Glaucoma laser

- up to 70% of patients did not need drops at 6 years.
- Less likelihood for glaucoma to progress than those taking drops.
- Less likelihood to require glaucoma surgery than those taking drops.
- Effects can last up to 6 years, and the procedure can safely be repeated if needed to try and keep you free from drops.

Data taken from a recent, extensive UK study. Unlike invasive eye surgery, this laser option:

- Causes no permanent tissue damage
- Has a low risk of complications



- Doesn't require incisions— return to normal activities the next day. Who is it for? SLT laser is now the NICE recommended first line treatment for open angle glaucoma and high eye pressure (OHT), in preference to drops. The majority of patients with open angle glaucoma or OHT are eligible. Talk to us to see if it's right for you! 028 92 280 103 Email: info.ni@affidea.com

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Howden's Ravenhill Road, Belfast celebrates 2nd Anniversary with Michelle at Helm

Celebrating two years of serving the trade and the local community, Howdens on Ravenhill Road has become a cornerstone for builders and homeowners alike in South Belfast.

Since its doors first opened in 2022, the branch has established itself as a go-to destination for high-quality kitchens and bedrooms, joinery, and hardware.

Since the very first day of trading, the branch has been led by Michelle Law, whose consistent leadership as Manager has been instrumental in the depot's growth.

Under Michelle's guidance, the Ravenhill team has built a reputation for the "no-nonsense" trade service that Howdens is famous for—focusing on stock availability, expert design advice, and fostering strong relationships with local tradespeople. Whether it's a small renovation or a large-scale housing project,

the branch has played a vital role in transforming homes across Belfast.

The success of the Ravenhill Road branch reflects a broader period of rapid expansion for Howdens across Northern Ireland. In the two years since this depot opened, the company has significantly increased its footprint in the region to meet rising demand.

Howdens now operates over 25 depots across Northern Ireland, including recent additions in locations like Ballynahinch and expanded facilities in Greater Belfast. This growth is part of a strategic "city-based" approach, ensuring that trade professionals are never more than a short drive

away from a local branch. By investing in Northern Ireland, Howdens has not only supported the local construction industry but has also created dozens of skilled jobs in sales, design, and logistics.

Founded in 1995 with just 14 depots, Howdens has grown into the UK's number one specialist kitchen supplier and a member of the FTSE 100. Despite its scale—now operating nearly 900 depots across the UK, Ireland, France, and Belgium—the company remains committed to its founding principle: being "worthwhile for all concerned."

Howdens Ravenhill Road is at 55 Ravenhill Road, Belfast BT6 8DU. Tel: 028 9010 1600

COUNTDOWN BEGINS TO 2026 BALMORAL SHOW

The Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS) has today officially launched the countdown to the 2026 Balmoral Show, announcing that Ulster Bank will return as principal sponsor as part of a new three-year partnership agreement.

The renewed sponsorship deal will see Ulster Bank continue its close association with the agri-food event through to 2028, reinforcing the bank's commitment to the local farming community and wider rural economy.

Taking place at the Eikon Exhibition Centre, Lisburn from 13–16 May 2026, this year's show promises an exciting programme of competitions, entertainment plus food and farming showcases. Visitors can look forward to a range of new attractions, including a stunt display show from Bolddog FMX in the main arena, a revamped horticulture area, and the usual mix of family entertainment and livestock events designed to inspire the next generation of farmers and food producers.

Looking ahead to the event, RUAS Group Operations Director Rhonda Geary said:

"Preparations are already

well under way for what we expect to be another outstanding Balmoral Show in 2026. As always, the show is a celebration of the very best of our local agri-food industry, and we are continually growing and evolving to ensure there is something new and exciting to see whether you are a longstanding visitor or coming to the show for the first time.

"We are delighted to welcome Ulster Bank back on board as our principal sponsor. Their long-term support has been integral to the success and growth of the event, and this new three-year agreement underlines the strength of that partnership."

Cormac McKervey, Senior Agriculture Manager at Ulster Bank, added:

"2026 will be Ulster Bank's 18th year as principal sponsor of the Balmoral Show and we are proud to continue our

longstanding association with the event. The agri-food sector is a significant contributor to the overall economy here and supporting farmers, growers and rural businesses, remains a key priority for us.

"Through our specialist agriculture teams and tailored financial solutions, we are committed to helping the industry meet challenges and plan for growth in what is an ever-evolving sector. The Balmoral Show provides a unique platform for us to connect with the farming community, celebrate success and highlight our network of expertise. We are pleased to extend our partnership with the RUAS and to play our part in making the 2026 show another memorable event."

The Balmoral Show remains Northern Ireland's largest annual agri-food event, attracting more



Rhonda Geary, RUAS Group Operations Director and Cormac McKervey, Senior Agriculture Manager, Ulster Bank, kick off the countdown to the 2026 Balmoral Show in partnership with Ulster Bank. The pair are joined by county Antrim farmer, John Cross, who received the award for Champion Clydesdale at the 2025 event.

than 100,000 visitors each year and providing an unrivalled showcase for livestock, machinery, food, horticulture and rural life. Further announcements

on competitions, attractions and ticket sales for Balmoral Show 2026 will be made in the coming months. For more information, visit www.balmoralshow.co.uk



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BUSINESS LEADERS URGED TO TAKE GREATER RESPONSIBILITY FOR CYBER SECURITY

Northern Ireland's business leaders have been urged to take greater responsibility for cyber security at a major new industry event hosted by Leaf IT in collaboration with Belfast Chamber.

The call to action was delivered at Belfast Cyber Expo 2026, held at the Clearer Twist National Stadium at Windsor Park and attended by over 150 delegates. Under the theme Securing the Future: AI, Risk & Resilience, the inaugural Expo brought together business leaders, IT professionals and cyber security specialists to examine the rapidly evolving threat landscape and the governance challenges emerging alongside accelerated artificial intelligence

adoption. Clare Guinness, CEO at Belfast Chamber, commented: "Across many organisations cyber security has been treated as the sole preserve of IT departments, but safeguarding a business against digital threats is a responsibility that must be owned at leadership level. "Events such as this provide an essential platform for collaboration, knowledge-sharing and practical guidance, ensuring that Northern Ireland businesses are equipped

to operate securely and competitively in an increasingly complex digital world." Recent statistics highlighted at the Expo reflect the urgency of the issue. Global ransomware attacks increased by 43% year-on-year, while phishing attacks rose by 1,200% in 2025, driven largely by AI-powered social engineering tactics, according to the World Economic Forum. Closer to home, the UK Government's Cyber Security Breaches Survey 2025 found that 43% of



businesses and 30% of charities experienced a cyber security breach or attack in the past 12 months. At the same time, AI adoption has surged to 88% among Northern Ireland businesses, raising significant governance and risk considerations. Despite this widespread uptake, 62% of organisations have no formal AI usage policy in place, and 30% actively encourage staff to experiment with freely available AI tools, contributing to the growth of so-called "shadow AI" practices. Alongside keynote presentations, the Expo featured hands-on product demonstrations, specialist breakout sessions and

structured networking opportunities, each designed to provide practical, actionable insight to strengthen security posture and embed more robust AI governance frameworks. Andrew Johnston, Managing Director at Leaf IT, added: "Our objective in hosting this inaugural Expo was to bring global expertise to Northern Ireland and provide businesses with clear, practical steps they can take to manage risk effectively. "The level of engagement on the day demonstrated that organisations recognise the urgency of this issue and are committed to strengthening their approach to cybersecurity."

Alana at Ormeau Golf Club: The Fairy Tree Bistro

Tucked away at 50 Park Road, Alana at Ormeau Golf Club: The Fairy Tree Bistro is a spot that has managed to balance the prestige of a historic golf club with the warmth of a carefree Bistro.

While the manicured greens of the BT7 course provide a stunning backdrop, you don't actually have to be a member—or even know how to swing a club—to enjoy the hospitality. The bistro has cultivated an inclusive atmosphere where locals and golfers alike gather for everything from a quick morning bite to a full evening of celebration.

The culinary day begins at 11:00 AM with a selection of "Lunch Bites" designed for those on the move or finishing a front nine. However, the real star of the morning is their famous Golfer's Fry, a hearty local staple that has earned a dedicated following. As the afternoon rolls into evening, the kitchen shifts gears at 3:00 PM to an extensive A La Carte menu. This selection features classic comforts such as succulent Steaks, Scampi, and traditional Roast Beef, alongside Battered Chicken Goujons and thoughtful Vegetarian options, ensuring that every palate is catered to until the doors close at 11:00 PM. Beyond the daily dining, the Fairy Tree Bistro has become a go-to destination for major life milestones. The venue is



particularly well-regarded for Wedding Celebrations and Family Gatherings, offering a competitive edge by waiving room charges for large groups. For those planning a wedding party, they even provide a Free DJ to keep the dance floor moving. This commitment to value extends to their community events, such as the popular Sunday Carvery held on the first and third Sunday of every month, and seasonal specials for dates like St. Patrick's Day and Mother's Day.

If you're looking to plan a visit or book an event, the team is easily reachable via their Park Road location or through their active social media presence. Between the scenic views and the friendly service provided by Alana and her staff, the Fairy Tree Bistro offers a slice of Belfast hospitality that feels both professional and personal. You can find more details or browse their latest menus at www.ormeaugolfclub.com or by reaching out directly at 028 9064 0700.

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Three tech startups receive over £1.8m to accelerate growth

Three tech startups receive over £1.8m to accelerate growth

Economy Minister Dr Caoimhe Archibald has announced that three technology companies are receiving over £1.8m in equity investment to accelerate product development, increase exports and create new jobs.

Optik AI Ltd in Derry, farmdrive in Antrim and Foresight in Belfast have received investment through Techstart Ventures, part of Invest NI's Access to Finance programme.

Visiting Optik AI's facility in the North West, the Minister said: "Access to finance for start-ups is crucial, and the Techstart Ventures fund is delivering essential support to early-stage tech companies so that they can accelerate innovation and growth in their business."

"It is excellent to see innovative businesses across the north already benefitting from the fund since its launch last year. I'm delighted to visit Optik AI to see how it has developed its software into a new cutting-edge AI platform to reach new markets, contributing towards our economic development."

Optik AI is a SaaS company that has developed a software platform to help B2B businesses optimise their sales strategies. The



Pictured are (L-R) Steven Scullion, Director of Corporate Finance at Invest NI, Economy Minister Dr Caoimhe Archibald and Ciaran Ryan, CEO at Optik AI at Optik's offices at The Amp in Derry.

company has received £600k from Invest NI's Techstart Ventures fund, which will be used to develop its human-assisted AI platform and reach new export markets.

Ciaran Ryan, CEO at Optik AI, said: "The demand for AI-driven sales technology is rapidly increasing and Techstart Ventures funding is helping us to accelerate the development of our software in line with this, optimising our product to target new global markets across Europe and the US. Invest NI is also supporting us to create five new jobs, so that we can build our team in tandem with our business growth."

farmdrive in Antrim has received £690k of Techstart Ventures funding to develop its livestock management solution to help farmers save time on compliance and record keeping. The support will assist Farmdrive to grow sales in Britain and increase exports in Europe.

Invest NI is also supporting Farmdrive to create eight new roles, including four software engineer roles, a data scientist and a digital marketing manager. Foresight, based in Belfast, has developed software to help businesses respond to regulatory change in chemical policy. The £500k Techstart Ventures funding that it secured will help it to accelerate product

development which aims to increase exports to the US and Europe.

Steven Scullion, Director of Corporate Finance at Invest NI, said: "Techstart Ventures provides equity investment to innovative early-stage technology companies seeking to commercialise their ideas. It's great to see Optik AI, farmdrive and Foresight beginning to grow their businesses by investing in product development and R&D. "Founders who have global ambitions and a need for investment monies can engage with Techstart Ventures to explore potential funding options for their business innovation journey."

Women in Business Report 2026

The number of women leading UK mid-market businesses has fallen to its lowest level in eight years, according to Grant Thornton's Women in Business Report 2026.

New data from the firm's International Business Report (IBR), the world's leading survey of mid-market companies, reveals a sharp decline in female representation at the very top of UK organisations. The findings are based on insights from 4,265 respondents globally, including more than 300 in the UK.

The research shows that the proportion of female CEOs in UK mid-market firms has fallen from 24% in 2025 to just 17% in 2026, a significant year-on-year drop and the lowest point in eight years. This contrasts sharply with global progress, where the percentage of female CEOs has continued along an upward trajectory, rising to 24% globally in 2026, up two percentage points from last year.

The decline is not limited

to the top job.

The data highlights a dip in the percentage of senior management roles held by women both in the UK and worldwide:

- UK: from 36% in 2025 to 36% in 2026
- Global: from 34% in 2025 to 33% in 2026

This slowdown comes at a time when external expectations around gender balance are rising sharply.

More than a third of UK mid-market businesses (34%) report having received requests for proof of gender balance from potential new investors in the past year. Other sources of such requests include government departments (30%) and partner organisations (30%). Notably, demand from UK regulators has surged from 15% in 2025 to 29% in 2026, highlighting a strengthening compliance

environment for gender balance.

Despite declining representation, UK firms report higher-than-average commitment to driving gender equality in a global context. Just under half (43%) of UK businesses say they remain committed to gender equality initiatives, above both the global average (39%) and the European averages (38%).

UK organisations are focusing their gender balance strategies on senior leadership positions (54% have a strategy in place), promotions (53%) and employee bonuses (47%).

Several areas have seen notable growth in focus over the past year, including retention strategies (up from 26% in 2025 to 32% in 2026) and senior leadership strategies (up from 43% in 2025 to 54% in 2026).

When asked about the impact of their gender balance initiatives, UK business leaders highlighted the areas where they see the greatest gains:

- 36% of leaders say their employees feel they are treated equally
- 29% say there are visible role models within their business
- 27% say that gender balance has improved their attractiveness to investors and new clients

However, respondents also pointed to areas where current strategies are proving less effective:

- Only 14% see gender balance strategies helping attract new employees
- 17% say they see current strategies improving the quality of decision-making
- 20% say programmes help with retention of female leaders

2025 Eastside Awards

The 2025 Eastside Awards, in association with Belfast City Airport, recently marked a historic milestone, celebrating its 10th anniversary by honoring the exceptional talent, resilience, and community spirit that define East Belfast.

Hosted by broadcaster Tara Mills at Titanic Belfast, the "glittering" ceremony highlighted the people and businesses that have made a transformational impact on the area over the past year.

One of the night's most significant success stories was John Minnis Estate Agents, which achieved an incredible "treble" of accolades. The firm walked away with the awards for Favourite Estate Agent, Business Growth, and Best Place to Work. This triple win underscores their reputation not only as a leading service provider but also as a top-tier employer in the region.

Sustainability and heritage were also front

and center. Encom Energy proved to be a powerhouse, winning Sustainable Business of the Year, while their very own Anna Patterson was named Young Person of the Year, signaling a bright future for green innovation in East Belfast.

Similarly, the historic Templemore Baths enjoyed a double celebration. The site won the award for Heritage & History, recognizing its successful restoration and cultural significance. Complementing this, Gregor Galway of Templemore Baths was named Tourism Hero, further solidifying the facility's role as a cornerstone of the city's tourism landscape.

The emotional peak of the evening came with the Outstanding Contribution Award, sponsored by East Belfast Enterprise. The honor was presented to Dot Blackburn, a legendary community champion from the Cregagh Estate. For over four decades, Dot's "TeamDot" voluntary work has provided a lifeline to families in crisis, offering everything from food and household items to unwavering compassion.

Other notable winners included Gilnahirk Primary School's David Corbett, who was named Favourite Primary Principal, and Strathearn School's Nicola Connery, who took home the

title of Favourite Post-Primary Principal. In the realm of sport, the Local Sporting Hero award was presented to Kim Turner of Glentoran Women's FC, celebrating her leadership in securing the 2025 Sports Direct Women's Premiership title.

With over 33,000 public votes cast, the 2025 Eastside Awards demonstrated that the strength of East Belfast lies in its people—from quiet volunteers to innovative business leaders. As the event enters its second decade, it continues to serve as a vital platform for recognizing the excellence that makes the "East" a vibrant place to live and work.



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LIVE HERE LOVE HERE ANNUAL AWARDS

Live Here Love Here, the people-powered campaign dedicated to improving local environments and inspiring civic pride, has announced the Newry, Mourne and Down winners at its 2026 Community Awards.

Held on February 19 at Belfast City Hall and hosted by TV presenter Joe Mahon, the event brought together community volunteers, council representatives, environmental organisations and partners to celebrate the vital role local people play in caring for Northern Ireland's natural and built environment.

The Live Here Love Here Community Awards – delivered in partnership with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), ten local councils and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, and managed by Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful – recognise outstanding voluntary action tackling some of our most pressing environmental challenges, including littering, biodiversity loss, neglected spaces and climate change. On the night, 13 awards were presented,

including Regional Champion Awards for each participating council area, as well as three special awards recognising long-term impact, community inclusion and emerging environmental leadership: the Bright Future Award, the Community Together Award and the Lasting Contribution Award.

The Inland Waterways Association of Ireland Newry & Portadown Branch (IWAI N&P) was announced as the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council Regional Champion in recognition of its long-term commitment to restoring, protecting and celebrating the Newry Canal as a vital nature corridor and recreational resource. Through invasive-species control, lock-gate restoration and habitat creation, the group has transformed the canal into an environmental asset that strengthens biodiversity, civic pride and local wellbeing.



Newry, Mourne and Down runner-up Heart of Down Red Squirrel Group was praised for its outstanding conservation work, using detailed surveys, habitat support and community engagement to boost red squirrel numbers across County Down, becoming a vital force for local wildlife protection and community pride. The district also celebrated success

in the special award categories, with Crossgar Village Greens winning the prestigious Bright Future Award. Meeting fortnightly, the group carries out litter picks, maintains planters and floral displays, and delivers a range of biodiversity projects supported by Live Here Love Here. Their "A River Runs Through It" project has transformed key public spaces, creating vibrant wildflower areas, improved river habitats and welcoming green spaces

that inspire community pride and environmental stewardship. To support the work of Live Here Love Here and other environmental programmes, visit keepnorthernirelandbeautiful.org, where you can find out how to get involved or make a donation. For more information and interview requests, please contact: Lauren Russell | +44 7970 267622 | lrussell@navigatorblue.com

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For over four decades Gibb Roofing & Chimney Specialists, Established in 1982, the company has built a reputation centred on technical expertise and reliability.

In an industry where temporary fixes are common, they have distinguished themselves by focusing on the complex physics of chimney maintenance. This longevity is rooted in a family-run approach that prioritizes word-of-mouth recommendations over aggressive marketing. By maintaining a team of fully trained and qualified experts, they ensure that every project, whether a minor repair or a total reconstruction, to meet stringent safety

requirements. The scope of their work goes far beyond simple cleaning or aesthetic touch-ups. A significant portion of their expertise lies in structural restoration, including comprehensive chimney rebuilds and the delicate process of re-pointing weathered brickwork. They are particularly adept at managing the "waterline" of a home—the critical area where the chimney meets the roof. By specializing in lead work and flashing, they

prevent the chronic damp issues that frequently plague older properties in Belfast. Furthermore, for homeowners who no longer utilize their fireplaces, the team provides safe, professional chimney removals that maintain the structural stability and watertight seal of the remaining roofline. Recognizing that a chimney is inextricably linked to the health of the entire roofing system, the company has evolved into a full-service exterior maintenance provider.

Their expertise extends to both domestic and commercial roofing, covering everything from slate tile replacement to the installation of modern uPVC fascias, soffits, and guttering. This holistic approach is especially vital during the winter months, when storm damage repairs become a priority for residents across Greater Belfast. By offering a "top-down" service, they provide a single point of accountability for a property's exterior, ensuring that every

component—from the chimney pot to the guttering—works in harmony to shield the inhabitants from the elements. Belfast Chimney Specialists are committed to transparency, offering free, no-obligation quotations that allow homeowners to make informed decisions about their property's safety. For further information or to request a consultation, visit belfastchimneyspecialists.co.uk.

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CHARITY GOLF DAY TEES OFF TO SUPPORT LOCAL ANIMAL SANCTUARY

Golfers are invited to tee off for a great cause at a Charity Golf Day in support of Assisi Animal Sanctuary on Friday 22nd May at Clondeboye Golf Club, Bangor.

The event promises a full day of golf, entertainment and fundraising, with £400 per four-ball, which includes a two-course meal following play. To ensure fair play for all participants, golfers are required to have an official Golf Ireland Handicap. Players can also look forward to fantastic prizes, along with a raffle, charity auction and lots of entertainment on the day. Adding to the atmosphere, the day will be hosted by local comedian and charity ambassador Andrew Ryan, who will be on hand to keep spirits high

and help raise vital funds for the sanctuary. Comedian and charity ambassador, Andrew Ryan said "I'm delighted to be hosting this charity golf day in support of the incredible work of Assisi Animal Sanctuary. It's set to be a brilliant day — great golf, great craic and all for a cause that's very close to my heart. For me, any excuse to get out on the golf course is a bonus, so this event is a no-brainer. There'll be plenty of laughs on the day and, most importantly, we'll be raising much-needed funds for an amazing local charity that does so

much for animals in our community." Music will also be provided on the course, with Andrew's colleague and friend, DJ Connor Brennan bringing the energy at the first hole. All funds raised will go directly towards supporting the animal sanctuary's work caring for and rehoming animals in need within the local community. Grace Williams, Fundraising Manager at Assisi Animal Sanctuary, said: "We're absolutely delighted to be working with Andrew on this charity golf day at



Clondeboye Golf Club in support of our wonderful charity, Assisi Animal Sanctuary. Events like this are vital for us, and the generosity of

everyone involved — from players to sponsors and supporters — will make a real difference to the animals in our care. With great golf, brilliant entertainment, and Andrew's fantastic hosting skills, it promises to be a truly special day that helps us continue giving animals a second chance at a happy life. To secure your place today, register now golf26@assisi-ni.org " Places are limited, and early booking is advised. Founded in 1997, Assisi Animal Sanctuary is one of Northern Ireland's largest independent

animal welfare charities. Based in County Down, Assisi rescues around 700 animals each year, including dogs, cats, rabbits, and guinea pigs. The animals in the charity's care receive shelter, food, veterinary treatment, and most importantly, love and the chance of finding their forever home. Animal welfare is at the heart of everything Assisi does. No matter an animal's age, background, or health, the team is committed to providing the best possible quality of life — something many have never experienced before.

As Assisi receives no government funding, it relies entirely on the generosity of individuals, businesses, and the wider community to continue its vital work. The charity must raise over £3,280 every day — around £1.2 million annually — to sustain its operations and continue to find animal companions their forever home. For more information or to book a team, please contact Assisi Animal Sanctuary's Fundraising Manager Grace Williams via golf26@assisi-ni.org For more information on Assisi Animal Sanctuary, visit: www.assisi-ni.org

Discover Your Perfect Travel Companion at Central Motorhomes

Central Motorhomes in Temple is the ultimate gateway to the open road. This dealership has carved out a unique niche by focusing on quality, innovation, and a genuine passion for the lifestyle.

As the dedicated dealer for both Chausson and Malibu, Central Motorhomes provides a diverse inventory that ranges from clever, entry-level designs to the absolute pinnacle of German engineering.

The Chausson Philosophy: Smart Design for Modern Travellers

Chausson has built a formidable reputation across Europe for its "smart" design philosophy, consistently pushing the boundaries of what is possible in a mobile living space. When you browse the Chausson collection at Central Motorhomes, you'll notice a distinct focus on versatility and the "all-inclusive" spirit. The popular Titanium Line is a perfect example, often featuring the brand's signature hideaway drop-down beds that retract into the ceiling to create a massive, open-plan lounge during the day. This innovative approach allows models like the 640 or 720 to feel significantly larger than their external dimensions suggest. For those who enjoy exploring more rugged or narrow routes, the Sport Line and X-Range offer a "slim-line" body that combines the agility of a van with the luxury of a coachbuilt



motorhome, ensuring you don't have to sacrifice comfort for maneuverability. Malibu: The Gold Standard of Premium Luxury For travellers who refuse to compromise on build quality or thermal efficiency, the Malibu range by Carthago represents the gold standard. Available exclusively through Central Motorhomes in this region, Malibu vehicles are engineered with a meticulous attention to detail that is evident from the moment you step inside. Whether you are looking at their Integrated (A-Class) models or their award-winning campervans, the construction quality is world-class. Malibu's

unique "two-room" concept and the XL Flexi-washroom are industry-leading features that provide a level of privacy and utility rarely found in mobile leisure vehicles. Their sophisticated double-floor technology provides immense underfloor storage and superior insulation, making these vehicles the ideal choice for year-round adventures in any climate. What truly sets Central Motorhomes apart is the hands-on expertise of its founders, Leon and Neil. As long-term motorhome and camping enthusiasts themselves, they bring a wealth of practical knowledge to every sale, ensuring that customers aren't just buying a vehicle,

but the right vehicle for their specific needs. From their base at Redbrae Business Park Temple, Lisburn, they offer a comprehensive "Service First to Last" experience that includes full aftersales support, habitation checks, and specialized guidance for customers from the Republic of Ireland regarding VRT and registration. By blending a curated selection of Chausson and Malibu models with a deeply personal approach to customer service, Central Motorhomes remains the first choice for those ready to embrace the freedom of the open road. For more information see www.centralmotorhomes.com

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BMW UNVEILS THE ALL-NEW iX3

BMW has officially signaled the start of a “new era” with the premiere of the all-new BMW iX3, the first series-production model of the Neue Klasse.

This next-generation Sports Activity Vehicle (SAV) introduces a radical shift in design, sustainability, and digital architecture, aiming to skip an entire vehicle generation in terms of technological advancement.

Performance and Ultra-Fast Charging

The iX3 50 xDrive will launch as the longest-range battery electric vehicle (BEV) in the UK, boasting a WLTP range of up to 500 miles. This is made possible by sixth-generation BMW eDrive technology, featuring high-voltage batteries with new cylindrical cells that increase energy density by 20%.

Key performance and charging metrics include:

- Output: 469 hp and 645 Nm of torque.
- Acceleration: 0 to 62 mph in 4.9 seconds.
- Charging: An 800-volt architecture allows for 400 kW rapid charging, adding 231 miles of range in just 10 minutes.

• Bidirectional Charging: The iX3 debuts Vehicle-to-Home (V2H) and Vehicle-to-Load (V2L) capabilities for the brand.



A Digital “Superbrain” Architecture

The iX3 debuts a “digital nervous system” powered by four high-performance computers known as superbrains. The “Heart of Joy” unit manages driving dynamics, processing data 10 times faster than previous systems to coordinate braking, steering, and power delivery.

Inside, the cabin is defined by the BMW Panoramic iDrive and Operating System X. This setup features a full-

width windscreen display (Panoramic Vision) that projects information across the driver’s entire field of vision, paired with a newly designed 3D Head-Up Display.

Sustainability and Design

BMW has adopted a “secondary first” approach, with approximately one-third of the iX3 constructed from recycled materials, including marine plastics and PET textiles. Consequently, the vehicle’s lifecycle carbon footprint is 34% lower than its predecessor. The

iX3 will be manufactured at the fossil-fuel-free Plant Debrecen in Hungary.

The exterior introduces a “reduced” design language, featuring vertical kidney grilles and flush door handles, while the interior is entirely leather-free, utilizing Econeer materials.

Pricing and UK Availability

The BMW iX3 50 xDrive is priced from £58,755 OTR. While series production began in autumn 2025, the first UK customer deliveries are now happening

Hyundai All-Electric Concept THREE

Concept THREE, Hyundai Motor’s first compact EV concept under the IONIQ sub-brand, embodies Art of Steel design language and signals the brand’s planned expansion into the European compact EV market.

Hyundai Motor Company unveiled Concept THREE, its first compact electric vehicle (EV) concept under the IONIQ sub-brand, at IAA Mobility 2025 in Munich.

The debut represents Hyundai Motor’s commitment to offering exceptional EVs in a rapidly evolving global market, where the focus shifts from technological advancement to experiences of emotional fulfillment.

As the first compact EV concept under the IONIQ sub-brand, Concept THREE signals Hyundai Motor’s future expansion into a new vehicle category, complementing its existing midsize and large EV models.

With Europe experiencing a surging demand for compact EVs — driven by urbanization, sustainability regulations and the growing need for space-efficient solutions — the Concept THREE demonstrates Hyundai Motor’s vision for meeting this demand by drawing on its advanced electrification capabilities.

Complementing its strategic positioning, Concept THREE’s innovative design also underscores the brand’s commitment to delivering a meaningful, emotionally resonant experience in an accessible and practical package.

Hyundai Motor



anticipates the introduction of Concept THREE to set the tone for its next chapter of design innovation and strengthen its competitive position in the electrification journey. Art of Steel transforms the strength and flexibility of steel into a language of sculptural beauty. Inspired by Hyundai Motor’s advanced steel technologies, the material’s natural formability reveals flowing volumes and precise lines that evoke the distinctive aesthetic quality of steel — powerful, gentle and timeless.

Aero Hatch: The sculpted body creates enveloping forms using three main surfaces, while intersecting lines add visual tension. The Aero Hatch profile delivers aerodynamic efficiency and a distinctive roofline combined with a vertical tailgate, emphasizing urban versatility.

Parametric Pixel: Parametric Pixel lightings are featured on both front and rear of the Concept THREE. The pixels are now

more expressive, forming a gradient that adds depth and visual rhythm to the overall design.

Material-driven design: The exterior wears an anodized-effect finish that channels the spirit of Hyundai’s Art of Steel design language—a celebration of material as muse. Lemon-tinted glass and matching wheels forge vibrant links between exterior and interior, the cabin defined by soft yellow and grey tonalities that play across shifting textures to create a space that’s both calm and expressive.

Furnished Space: The cabin design creates environments that feel warm, intuitive, and calming. By embracing soft volumes and user-focused layouts, it fosters a sense of serenity and clarity.

Customizable Experience: Modular ‘Bring Your Own Lifestyle (BYOL)’ widgets offer tailored experiences that allow customers to personalize their journey.

Mr. Pix: A symbolic character integrated

throughout the car evokes curiosity, joy and emotional connection, offering playful storytelling through ‘hidden surprises’ and interactive design elements.

Sustainability: The interior envisions the use of sustainable materials such as ocean waste textiles and lightweight aluminum foam. These materials underscore Hyundai Motor’s long-term vision to reduce environmental impact while delivering premium design.

Nearly 80 percent of Hyundai Motor vehicles sold in Europe are locally manufactured, reflecting the brand’s deep integration and ability to tailor solutions to the unique mobility needs of both urban areas and rural communities.

Compact EVs play a critical role in addressing Europe’s urban challenges, as exemplified by the debut of the Concept THREE, underscoring Hyundai Motor’s mission to make electrification accessible and attractive for European consumers.

Keep on Truckin’

The UK pickup market in 2026 has undergone a quiet revolution.

No longer just “rattle-and-hum” workhorses for muddy fields, these vehicles have become the Swiss Army knives of the British road. Here is the story of the five best pickups currently available in NI.

The Tech-Savvy Titan: Ford Ranger

If you take a stroll through a leafy suburb or a bustling construction site, you’re almost guaranteed to see a Ford Ranger. In 2026, it remains the undisputed king of the UK market. The big news this year is the Ranger PHEV, which has become the darling of the “lifestyle” crowd. It offers over 25 miles of pure electric range—perfect for sneaking through Zero Emission Zones—while still packing the 3.5-tonne towing punch needed for a weekend with the horsebox. For those who want more “oomph,” the Raptor variant remains the ultimate toy, featuring Fox Live Valve dampers that make speed bumps feel like cotton wool.

The Indestructible Legend: Toyota Hilux

Further north, where the roads turn to gravel and the weather turns to spite, the Toyota Hilux is the local hero. Now in its ninth generation for 2026, the Hilux has finally embraced the future without losing



its “bulletproof” soul. The new 48V Hybrid system has smoothed out the diesel clatter, making long hauls on the M6 significantly more civilized. It’s the truck you buy when you don’t just want to get there, but you absolutely must get back. With Toyota’s 10-year service-activated warranty, it’s the closest thing to a lifelong companion you can buy on four wheels.

The Executive Suite: Volkswagen Amarok

For the business owner who needs to tow a mini-digger on Monday but host a client on Tuesday, there is the Volkswagen Amarok. While it shares its DNA with the Ford Ranger, the VW feels like it went to a much posher school. The interior is a masterclass in

“truck-luxury,” featuring high-grade leathers and a minimalist dashboard that wouldn’t look out of place in a Touareg. It’s the quietest ride in the segment, making it the premier choice for those who treat their cab as a mobile office.

The No-Nonsense Workhorse: Isuzu D-Max

If the Amarok is a tailored suit, the Isuzu D-Max is a pair of high-quality steel-toed boots. It doesn’t pretend to be an SUV. It’s rugged, slightly loud, and incredibly honest. In 2026, the D-Max EV has started appearing on fleet rosters, offering a 1-tonne payload with zero tailpipe emissions—a feat many thought impossible for a dedicated 4x4. For the traditionalists, the V-Cross trim offers just enough

creature comforts (like Apple CarPlay and heated seats) to keep you happy without making you feel like you’re being “soft.”

The Value King: KGM Musso

Finally, we have the KGM Musso (formerly SsangYong). In a world where pickup prices have crept toward luxury SUV territory, the Musso remains the champion of the “more for less” philosophy. It’s unique in the UK for offering the Saracen+ model, which features an extra-long load bed that makes it a favourite for landscapers and logistics firms. It might not have the “badge appeal” of a Ford or VW, but with a refined multi-link rear suspension, it actually rides more comfortably than many of its leaf-sprung rivals.

Kimmins launches two new hard hitting road safety campaigns

Minister for Infrastructure Liz Kimmins has launched two powerful new road safety campaigns which went live on television screens recently.

The hard-hitting campaigns — called ‘Priority List’ and ‘Control or Speed’ — address two of the main causes of deaths and serious injuries on our roads — speeding and, more generally, driver behaviour.

Launching the campaigns the Minister said: “Too many people are dying on our roads, something that has been brought into sharp focus within recent weeks. We are only just into the third month of 2026 and, tragically, 15 people have lost their lives.

“We must all do everything we can to ensure no more families are plunged into the unimaginable and life changing grief that road deaths bring to their door.

“As Minister, I want to do all I can to ensure

everyone who uses our roads, does so safely.

To help drive real behavioural change on our roads we need a societal conversation about how we all behave when we are travelling and, today I am launching two new powerful and hard-hitting advertisements to help stimulate that conversation.

“The first campaign, ‘Priority List’ challenges the everyday choices drivers make that lead to collisions - inattention, driving too close, and momentary distractions. These may seem minor in the moment, but they can have devastating, life changing consequences. The campaign highlights how a split second decision to take a risk can end in tragedy, a scenario many of

us will sadly recognise.

“The second, addresses excessive speed, which remains a major factor in deaths and serious injuries, particularly on rural roads where you are likely to encounter more difficulties. Despite the risks, many drivers believe they are in control when speeding. However, evidence shows that speed reduces reaction time, increases stopping distances, and leads to more severe outcomes. The message of this campaign, entitled ‘Control or Speed’, is simple: you can have control, or you can have speed - but you cannot have both.”

Minister Kimmins added: “The campaigns will run across TV, radio, digital platforms, and outdoor media, with a

focus on raising awareness among all drivers with a particular focus on younger drivers.

“Alongside this work, my Department is reviewing several speed related matters, including national speed limits on rural roads and dual carriageways, HGV limits, and the wider use of 20mph zones. A public consultation is now open, and I encourage you to take part and make your views heard.”

These latest road safety campaigns complement recent work undertaken by the Department for Infrastructure to improve road safety behaviour. Current campaigns include safety around school buses for children www.sharetheroadtozero.com/




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After the Rain: Finding and Fixing Roof Leaks

The storm has finally broken, leaving behind that crisp, petrichor-scented air and a sense of relief.

But as the clouds part, a rhythmic drip... drip... drip... echoes through the house. A roof leak is rarely a sudden, dramatic event; it's usually a quiet invader that waits for the silence after the rain to reveal its path. Tracking down the source is often more of a detective's game than a handyman's chore, as water is notoriously deceptive about where it enters and where it eventually lands.

Because of gravity and the pitch of your roof, the water entering your home rarely takes a direct vertical path. It might seep through a crack near the chimney, run six feet down a rafter, and then finally soak through your

ceiling in the middle of a bedroom. When you spot a "tea stain"—those telltale brownish or yellowish rings—on your ceiling, remember that the actual hole in your roof could be several feet away from the spot on your drywall.

If you have attic access, the best time to investigate is while the roof is still wet. Armed with a flashlight, look for damp insulation or dark streaks along the wooden rafters. If the rain has already stopped, look for "shiners"—nails that missed the rafter and are now covered in white frost or rust. These cold nails often collect condensation or serve as the perfect "dripping point" for

water traveling along the underside of the roof deck.

Stepping outside provides a different set of clues. You aren't just looking for a hole; you're looking for irregularities in the roof's "armor." Missing or cracked shingles are the most obvious culprits, appearing as dark, bald patches against the uniform texture of the roof. However, the most vulnerable areas are the "penetrations"—anywhere a builder cut a hole for a chimney, a plumbing vent, or a skylight. These areas rely on metal flashing and rubber seals that often dry out and crack long before the shingles themselves fail.

Keep an eye on your gutters as well. If you notice a heavy accumulation of black, sandy granules in the troughs, your shingles are shedding their protective layer. This is a sign of an aging roof that is becoming brittle and losing its ability to shed water effectively. Similarly, clogged gutters are a primary cause of leaks; when water can't flow away, it backs up under the shingles or rots the wooden fascia boards behind the gutter line.

The most effective way to handle a leak is to prevent it through seasonal check-ups. Ideally, you should clear your gutters

twice a year—once in late autumn and again in spring—to ensure water has a clear path to the ground. While you're up there, a quick visual check of the "pipe boots" (the rubber seals around plumbing vents) can save you thousands. These rubber components typically last about ten years, which is often half the lifespan of the shingles themselves. Replacing a cracked boot is a simple, inexpensive fix that prevents a major interior headache.

When it comes to repairs, many small issues have straightforward solutions. A single missing shingle or a small crack in the flashing can often be addressed with high-grade roofing cement or a targeted patch. However, if your roof is over twenty years old and you see widespread curling or "balding," a patch may only be a temporary bandage. In these cases, a full replacement is usually the only way to ensure the structural integrity of your home.

DIY repairs are excellent for pride and the pocketbook, but roofs are inherently dangerous. If the pitch of your roof is steep or you feel even slightly uneasy on a ladder, call a professional. No repair bill is more expensive than an afternoon in the emergency room.

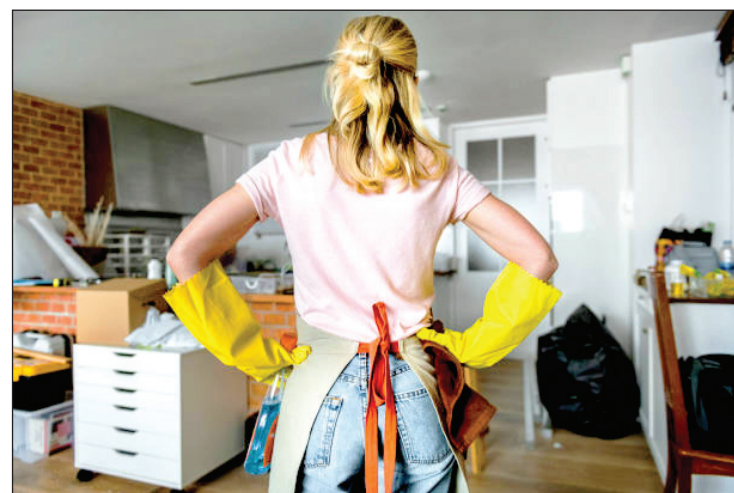
MAINTENANCE TASKS FOR APRIL

April is nature's alarm clock, but it's also the month where your home and garden demand a little manual intervention to shake off the winter blues.

As the soil warms and the days stretch out, the priority shifts from simply surviving the cold to preparing for the "high season" of summer living. It is the bridge between the hibernation of March and the frantic growth of May, making it the perfect window to tackle tasks before they become overwhelming.

The Garden Awakening

In the garden, your primary mission is to get ahead of the growth curve. The Maiden Mow is the first major milestone; when the grass finally starts to push upward, give it a light trim. It is crucial to set your mower blades high for these first few passes, as scalping the lawn too early can stress the root system. While you're out there, launch a proactive strike against weeds. Young, tender weeds are significantly easier to pull than the established monsters they will become by June. Once the beds are clear, applying a thick layer of mulch will act as both a weed suppressant and a moisture-lock for the warmer months ahead. Don't forget the "room" outdoors either—April is the ideal time to scrub down the patio



furniture and check if your wooden decking or benches need a fresh seal of oil to survive the summer sun.

Shielding the Exterior Moving to the house itself, your home's exterior has likely spent the last few months taking a beating from wind and rain. Start by inspecting the gutters; even if you cleared them in the autumn, winter storms often deposit a fresh layer of grit and stray twigs that can lead to overflows during April showers. While you have the ladder out, give the windows and frames a deep scrub. Winter leaves a greasy film of salt and pollution on the glass that dulls the natural light entering your home. A thorough

cleaning doesn't just improve your view—it allows you to inspect the seals and frames for any rot or cracks that might have developed during the freeze-thaw cycles of the colder months.

Technical Health and Safety

Inside the home, the focus should shift toward efficiency and safety. Before the first heatwave hits, service your cooling systems or at the very least, swap out the HVAC filters. A dusty filter forces the system to work harder, driving up your energy bills and shortening the unit's lifespan. Similarly, take a moment to pull your refrigerator away from the wall and vacuum the condenser coils. Dust buildup here acts as insulation, making your fridge work overtime to keep things cold. This is also the standard time to perform your bi-annual safety check: test the batteries in your smoke and carbon monoxide detectors to ensure they are fully operational for the

season ahead.

The Seasonal Transition

Finally, April is the best time for a functional declutter. As you rotate your wardrobe from heavy wools to lighter linens, be ruthless with what you put into storage; if you didn't wear a coat all winter, it likely doesn't deserve space in your closet next year. This seasonal swap-over is the perfect excuse to deep-clean the hidden corners of your bedroom and storage areas that usually get bypassed. By clearing out the physical and mental "winter weight" now, you create a refreshed environment that matches the energy of the world outside.

A Quick Warning: Before you hook up the garden hose for the first time, check your outdoor taps for hairline fractures. If water was trapped in the pipe during a freeze, the first time you turn the tap on could result in a hidden leak behind your siding or in your basement.

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Warm Healthy Homes Strategy launched

Communities Minister Gordon Lyons recently set out a long-term, cross-government approach to tackling fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

Speaking after visiting a home in Hopewell Crescent, Belfast to launch 'Warm Healthy Homes: A Northern Ireland Fuel Poverty Strategy 2026-2036', Minister Lyons said: "I am pleased to launch the Warm Healthy Homes strategy, a new approach that has secured Executive backing and which will help lift families out of fuel poverty."

"This is a comprehensive 10-year strategy to ensure that cold, damp homes become a thing of the past. Fuel poverty affects nearly one in four households, and its consequences are linked to poor health and financial stress, particularly for the less well off. This strategy sets out a clear pathway to change that."

The Minister continued: "Together with the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy and the Housing Supply Strategy, the Warm Healthy Homes Strategy will tackle the root causes of fuel poverty and provide meaningful measures and actions which will make a real difference to people across Northern Ireland."

"As part of the strategy, I will introduce a new Warm



Communities Minister Gordon Lyons (right) pictured at the launch of the Warm Healthy Homes Strategy in Belfast with (left) John McMullan, Vice Chair, Northern Ireland Housing Executive; and householder Trevor Rainey, who had a Low Carbon retrofit upgrade fitted to his home by NIHE last summer.

Healthy Homes Fund next year, for which I intend to allocate £150million to deliver of energy efficiency investment in its first five years. This fund will transform low-income households, modernising energy inefficient homes. Through this fund, along with energy wellbeing advice from trusted partners in the community, I want to ensure those worst affected have the information and means to upgrade their homes for the better. I

also want to improve housing standards and my Department has already begun consulting on a revised Decent Homes Standard for social housing."

Householder Trevor Rainey, who had a Low Carbon retrofit upgrade fitted to his home by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive last summer, said: "Since the work was done my bills are a lot lower, the house is warmer and the hot water is great in the mornings. I'd

recommend it to anyone."

The full Warm Healthy Homes: A Northern Ireland Fuel Poverty Strategy 2026-2036 document is available at: www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/warm-healthy-homes-2026-2036-new-fuel-poverty-strategy-northern-ireland

The Minister has made a written ministerial statement to the Assembly: www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/announcement-publication-warm-healthy-homes-strategy

NIFRS REVEALS HIGHEST HOUSE FIRE FATALITIES IN 2025

2025 was the highest year of house fire fatalities in a quarter of a century with 16 losses of life.

The statistics from Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service (NIFRS) reveal that half of the incidents were smoking material related with electrical causes contributing to 4 fatalities. A third of the incidents did not have working smoke alarms.

It is known that 75% of the fatalities were people who lived alone, and over 65% of those were also in NIFRS People at Risk group.

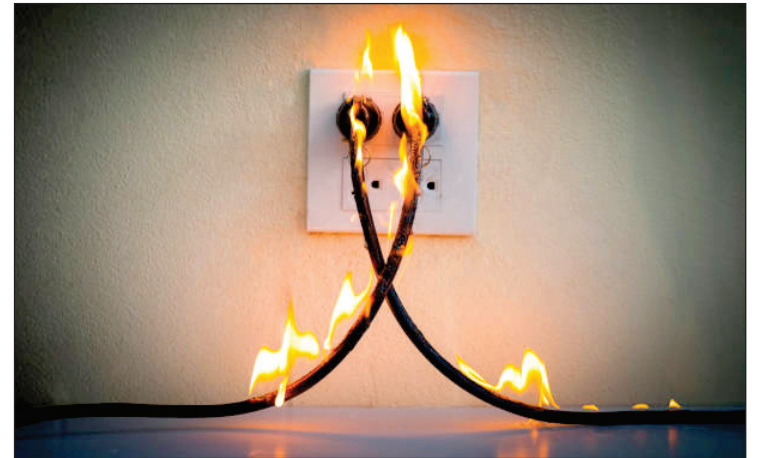
NIFRS is urging the public to start the year by taking extra care at home with their safety habits. Most fires are preventable and having working smoke alarms and changing behaviours that create risk can save your life.

NIFRS Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer Marcus Wright said:

"Our thoughts and sympathies are with the families and loved ones of those who have died in 2025 in house fires. This is the highest number of fatalities since 1999 and is a key priority and concern for us. The fires show how quickly everyday situations can turn into life-changing emergencies leading to devastating impacts for our community."

"We are pleading with the public to make home fire safety a priority to prevent further loss of life or serious injury."

"Smoking materials has been the leading cause of fatal house fires, accounting for a staggering 43% of such deaths over the past 10 years. We strongly advise for you to smoke outdoors at your property and to extinguish cigarettes before placing them



in a suitable container, such as a metal bin.

"A majority of the fatal fires started in a bedroom followed by living room and kitchen. Therefore, we ask that you check your smoke alarms are fitted, tested regularly, and replace batteries when needed. Please also consider installing smoke alarms in the rooms you use the most. We would also advise heat detectors in your kitchen and utility."

"As we continue to be in the high-risk time of year for house fire, we are asking you to take time to reach out to vulnerable family members, neighbours and friends who may need support to stay safe from fire, especially those who live alone. If you have any concerns about this person, you can also complete our online Home Fire Safety Check with them, or request an in-person visit."

"We are also calling on our partner agencies to make use of our referral system for Home Fire Safety Checks. You are the

'eyes and ears' in our community to helping us keep those most at risk safe from fire.

"We are currently considering what more can be done, over and above what is currently being done, to help keep those most at risk safe from fire, as we continue to educate our

community and deliver engagement activities."

If you fit NIFRS Person at Risk criteria, have no access to the internet or unable to complete the online self-assessment, please contact NIFRS by phone to receive a free in person Home Fire Safety Check on 028 9266 4221.

What to do about damp walls

Frustratingly, many homes throughout the country are affected by damp internal walls. Not only do patches of damp look terrible, but they can also be hazardous to your health and affect the structural integrity of your property.

If you're struggling with these issues, learning how to treat damp walls internally can save your home and your wellbeing.

Rising damp is a very common issue, that can affect flats, houses and any other structure. But what causes rising damp in internal walls?

Rising damp starts low and moves up your home's walls, causing serious issues. Often this is due to your damp proof course failing through poor installation, age, or damage. Water is very good at working its way into our homes through your damp proof course thanks to tiny tears or mistakes made during the installation process.

What's more, over time, structures near your home (like steps) can also cause water to penetrate your damp proof course. Moisture then begins to seep

into your walls, spreading through the materials and causing issues.

Condensation refers to patches of moisture that can form on the walls of your home, which can lead to health issues and structural damage. If you're unsure, you can check whether your walls are damp using your hand or a damp meter.

This frustrating problem can be caused by:

- Issues with your gutters
- Damage to your roof
- Breaks or cracks in your wall's mortar
- Damage from fixings in your home usually by screwing or bolting things to your walls

If you're struggling with damp in your home, you may be wondering "how do you stop damp coming through internal walls?" The best remedy here is damp proofing. This can prevent the health, structural and aesthetic issues associated

with excess moisture in your home.

Depending on the cause of your moisture issue, you can protect your home and family by using damp proof paint, damp proofing treatments or cavity trays.

Rising damp is particularly irritating as it can be quite tricky to remedy. Damp walls, degrading skirting boards, staining and fluffy substances in your plaster are all signs of rising damp and it's important you act ASAP. Learning how to treat rising damp on internal walls is done by identifying the cause and fixing the issue.

It's inadvisable to simply get rid of the signs of rising damp, as unless you fix the root cause, it will come back again and again.

Generally, repairing any tears in your damp proof course is the best way of eliminating rising damp.

What's more, if your damp proof course is being bridged by structures next to your home, removing these can also eradicate the cause of rising damp.

If you're unlucky enough to have issues with damp internal walls, your best option is to contact an expert. They'll be able to quickly locate the source of your problem and suggest the best treatment options. This will save you many headaches plus time and energy that could be better spent elsewhere.

If you'd like to have the assurance your damp problem is being dealt with once and for all, working with a tradesperson is a great choice. The average cost of a damp proofing course is £850.

For further information see <https://www.checkatrade.com/blog/how-to/treat-damp-walls-internally/>

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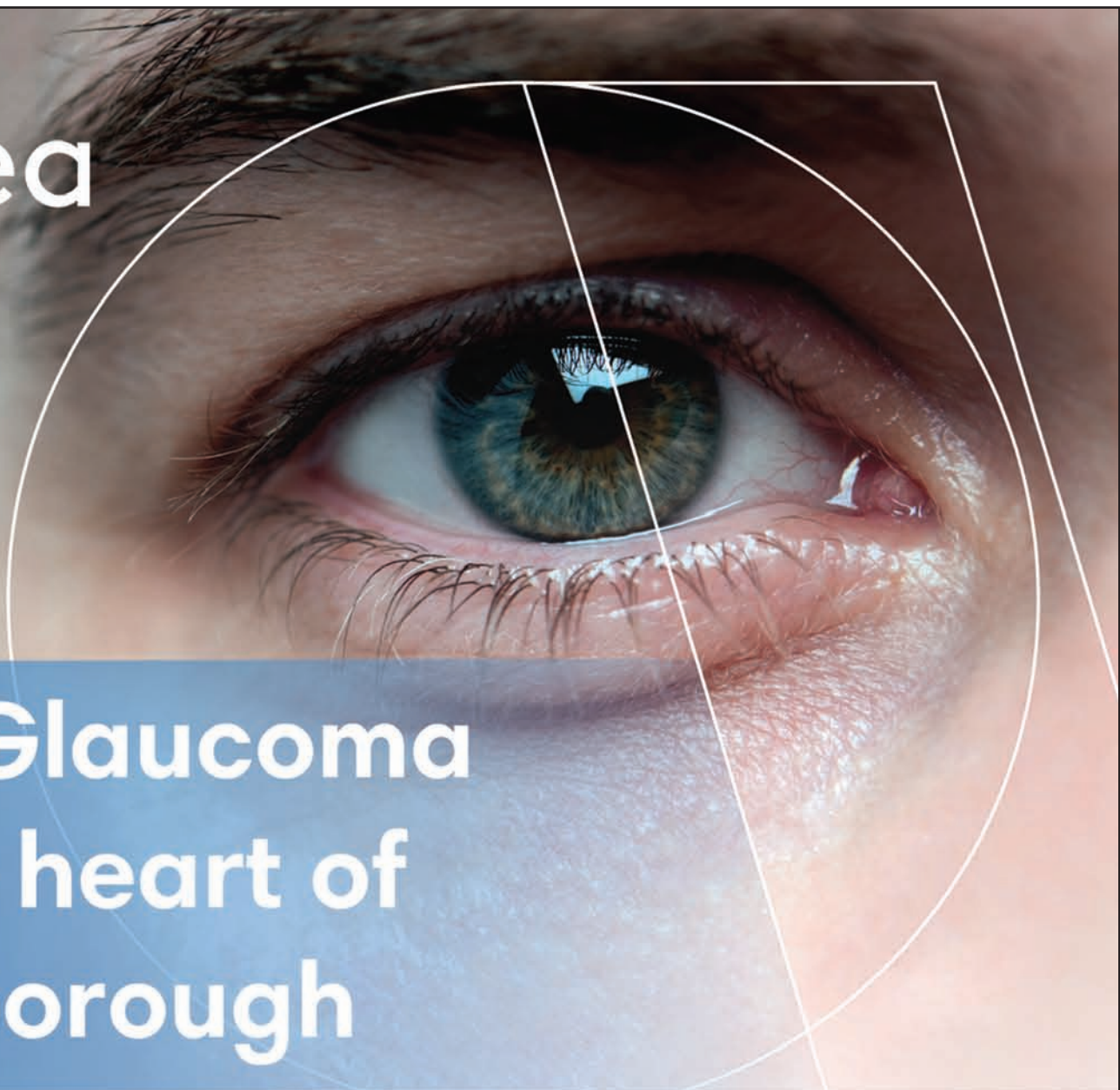
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