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Pictured with schoolchildren from a local primary school at the Ulster Folk Museum are Communities Minister Gordon Lyons, Kathryn Thomson, Chief Executive of National Museums NI and Dr Paul Mullan, Northern Ireland Director at The National Lottery Heritage Fund.

COMMUNITIES MINISTER 'REAWAKENS' THE ULSTER FOLK MUSEUM WITH £50M IN FUNDING

Communities Minister Gordon Lyons has announced a £50million investment in the Ulster Folk Museum.

The funding will support the delivery of the Reawakening project – a pivotal opportunity to improve the Ulster Folk Museum’s facilities, enhance access to collections and strengthen the museum’s role in helping people

connect with their heritage.

The Minister said: “For more than 60 years, the Ulster Folk Museum has preserved, shared and celebrated the traditions, skills and ways of life of the people of Ulster, past and present,

and this investment is vital to ensure our heritage is retained for future generations.

“The Reawakening Project will see the Ulster Folk Museum transform to a multi-layered heritage and environment resource, which sustains

more relevant and active connections with its audiences. This marks a profound shift in the museum’s positioning.

Continued on page 4

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MAKE WAVES WITH SWIMATHON

WATER-LOVERS across North Down are being urged to dive into Swimathon 2026, as it celebrates four decades of swimming success.

The sponsored event - now the world’s largest annual pool-based fundraising swim - is taking place at nearly 500 venues across the UK from March 20 to 22. Pools set to play host include Bangor Aurora Aquatic as well as Queen’s Sport, Botanic Avenue, Templemore Baths, Templemore Avenue and Olympia Leisure Centre, Boucher Road in Belfast. Lagan Valley Leisureplex at Lisburn Leisure Park, and Leisure complex and Joey Dunlop Leisure Centre, Garryduff Road, Ballymoney are also venues.

Since 1986, more than 750,000 participants have taken part in Swimathon and raised over £55 million for good causes. This year, organisers are calling on swimmers of all ages and abilities to help celebrate

the event’s 40th anniversary by making a splash for Cancer Research UK, end of life charity Marie Curie and Swimathon Foundation.

Swimathon offers a variety of individual challenges from 500m up to a supercharged Triple 5k or teams of 2-5 people can take part in a 1.5k, 2.5k or 5k relay. Anyone who can’t make one of the organised sessions can sign up to MySwimathon and choose a distance, time and venue that suits to complete their swim anytime in March.

What started as an initiative to increase participation in swimming at local authority pools forty years ago, has become a much-loved force for good - earning far-reaching support.

Sign up now at swimathon.org

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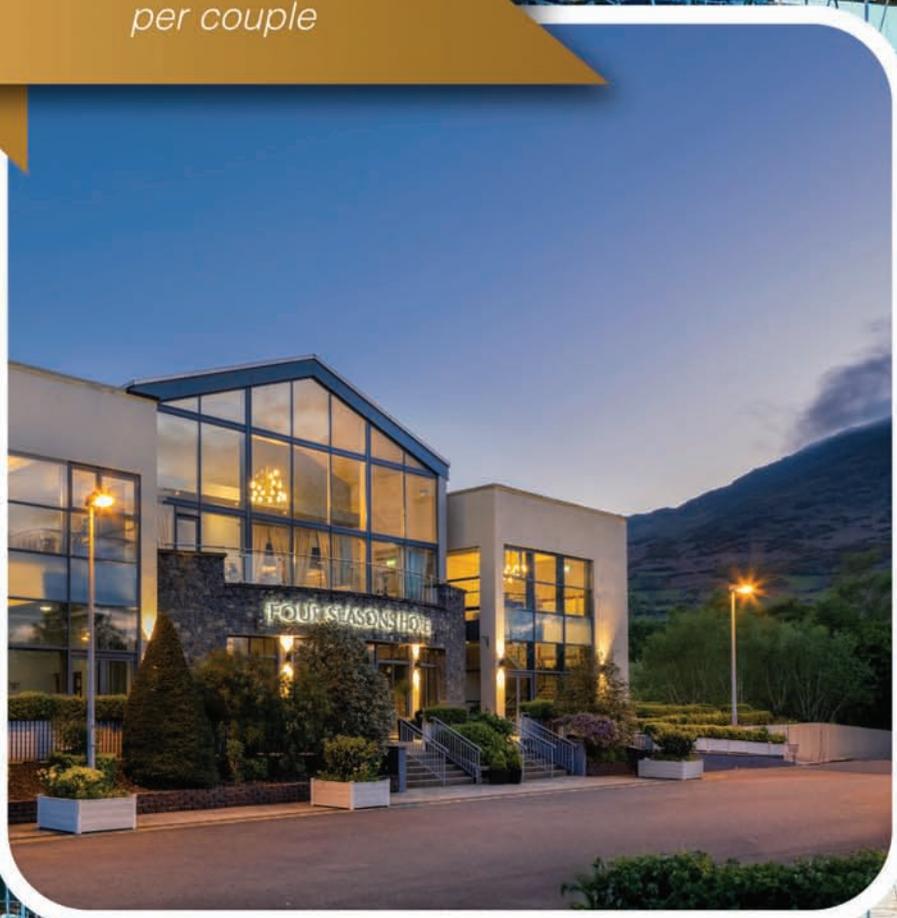
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Ballyholme Bay and Yacht Club Redevelopment Plan

North Down Alliance MLAs Andrew Muir and Connie Egan have met with the leadership of Ballyholme Yacht Club to discuss plans for the redevelopment of the clubhouse into a world-class water sports centre.

The plan is in its pre-application community consultation phase and is part of Ards and North Down Council's wider plans for Bangor's Waterfront, with support from the Belfast Region City Deal.

Ballyholme Bay and the Yacht Club have been identified by the Royal Yachting Association as a premier location for major sailing and water sports events.

Speaking following the meeting, Andrew Muir MLA welcomed the engagement:

"The prospect of seeing the Ballyholme Yacht Club transformed into a world-class facility is incredibly exciting, and I was grateful for the opportunity to see the plans and discuss them at length. The engagement to date with the local community and wider Bangor thus far is positive, and I hope that will continue throughout the redevelopment project.

"Ballyholme is a thriving, family-friendly club that offers a range of watersports activities from sailing to paddle boarding, and



(L-R) David McMullan, Team Leader, BYC Redevelopment; Connie Egan MLA; Andrew Muir MLA and Commodore Rob Milligan, BYC Board.

this investment will allow it to host national and international competitions and events. It is not only an opportunity for members of the club, but for the entire city in terms of tourism and the local economy. The wider waterfront development will be a huge boost to Bangor."

Connie Egan MLA has added, "The redevelopment of

Ballyholme Yacht Club will enable it to serve as a leading destination for sailing and water sports, attracting visitors from across Northern Ireland and further afield to North Down.

"I was pleased to meet with the team at Ballyholme Yacht Club to discuss their plans for this redevelopment project and to learn more about the steps they

are taking to consult with the community. I would encourage anyone interested in having their say on this project to visit the Ards and North Down Borough Council Website."

The development plans for Ballyholme Yacht Club can be viewed here: <https://www.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk/article/1600/Ballyholme-Yacht-Club-Water-Sports-Centre>



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Managed Recovery for Glenlyon Park called for

Alliance representatives Andrew Muir MLA and Alderman Martin McRandal have called for managed recovery at Glenlyon Park in Holywood to address the damage caused by subsequent storms and invasive species.

The woodland area was badly impacted by Storm Eowyn, with the most recent storm compounding the loss of tree coverage. Invasive species such as rhododendron and laurel are also impacting biodiversity at the council-run site.

Following a recent visit to the park, Councillor for Holywood & Clondeboye, Martin McRandal, said: "The devastation caused by Storm Eowyn is not something that was going to be rectified overnight, but a year on, we need to protect this site for nature and the public alike. Taking a walk around the park, it is not just the loss of trees that is striking, but also the spread of laurel and rhododendron, invasive species that compete with native species and reduce biodiversity.

"As well as planting new native trees in the new season, we must deal with this threat of invasive species, as Council has done in



Alderman Martin McRandal and Andrew Muir MLA at Glenlyon Park.

Ballymenoch Park. I will be taking this issue forward with officers to ensure that Glenlyon receive due care and attention the park rightly deserves."

North Down's Andrew Muir MLA added: "It is sad to see that Glenlyon continues to suffer from the impact of storms, including Storm Eowyn, which

hit last year. I wrote to Ards and North Down Borough Council to call for more proactive management and am pleased that Glenlyon will be included in the next planting season to take advantage of the openings in the tree canopy. However, in addition to planting new native trees, action must be taken to retain the remaining mature trees and deal with invasive species. We must do all we can to look after this much-loved public park."

"IN BLOOM" FUNDING PROGRAMME

Ards and North Down Borough Council is pleased to announce that applications for this year's "In Bloom" Funding Programme are now open.

The scheme supports community led horticultural projects across the Borough, with funding available for essential items such as plants, bulbs, compost, planters, and gardening tools.

The initiative aims to enhance local green spaces, promote sustainable gardening practices, and encourage community involvement.

Community groups applying for support should demonstrate how their project meets the following criteria:

- Meet the core objectives of Ards and North Down in Bloom by focusing on the key criteria: Horticultural, Environment, and Community.
- Projects should help to instil local pride, create awareness of the environment and biodiversity, encourages cross community participation and involvement for those of all ages and abilities.
- Provide a vision as to how the funding will enhance the particular areas and how this will be sustained in



Ards and North Down Mayor Councillor Gillian McCollum joined by L-R Sandra Henderson, Ruth-Anne Strotten, Louis Gilmore and Liz Elliot from the Ballywalter Community Action Group.

subsequent years.

- Evidence of approval from relevant landowner where works are to be carried out.
- Where appropriate insurance liability cover is in place, copy of certificate and schedule to be submitted.
- How the works are to be carried out, and by whom.
- Detailed breakdown of how funding will be utilised, and receipts submitted accordingly.

Ards and North Down Mayor Councillor

Gillian McCollum said: "The 'In Bloom' initiative reflects the very best of our community spirit here in Ards and North Down. Every year, residents, volunteers, and local groups come together to make our city, towns, villages, and shared spaces more vibrant, more welcoming, and more environmentally sustainable. I am continually inspired by the dedication of those who invest their time and passion into

enhancing our Borough. I would encourage community groups of all sizes to apply for this funding. Together, we can continue to nurture pride in our neighbourhoods and create beautiful, biodiverse spaces for everyone to enjoy."

For more information and how to apply, please visit In Bloom Funding - Ards and North Down Borough Council <https://www.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk/In-Bloom-Funding>

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Continued from page 1

The Reawakening is not just about reinvestment – it's about reimagining the museum's purpose to ensure it thrives for the next 25 years and beyond as a vibrant, relevant and indispensable resource for society."

The project will be funded by £40million through the Department for Communities and £10million from The

National Lottery Heritage Fund – their biggest grant in Northern Ireland in a decade. National Museums NI is also working with a number of funding trusts and philanthropists to explore other sources of funding, recognising the very significant benefits this project delivers and in line with the Framework for the Department's Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme.

Kathryn Thomson, Chief Executive of National Museums NI, said:

"The Ulster Folk Museum has had limited investment for decades, and some of its facilities are no longer fit for purpose. Our Reawakening project will deliver lasting and measurable social and economic value. We have been advocating Ulster Folk Museum's potential as a heritage asset for a number of years.

"Today's confirmation of support from the Minister and his Department is a significant and exciting milestone. We are also

grateful to The National Lottery Heritage Fund for their instrumental support on our journey.

"The Ulster Folk Museum's collection is a people's collection. It has never been more relevant to our lives than today. These objects and stories reflect shared experiences and different traditions from across Ulster and help people better understand who we all are.

This co-ordinated investment allows us to prioritise the themes of identity, the environment, and learning and skills, across the museum experience, ensuring Ulster Folk Museum will serve communities for generations to come."

Dr Paul Mullan, Northern Ireland Director at The National Lottery Heritage

Fund, said: "It's wonderful to see National Museums NI bring together a funding package that will reawaken the much-loved Ulster Folk Museum.

"Thanks to National Lottery players we're able to commit £10million that so far has helped lay the groundwork and will now deliver this visionary project that will connect people to heritage that is accessible, relevant, sustainable and valued.

"At the same time as improving facilities, opening up collections and focussing on the natural environment, the project provides opportunities for creating and sustaining jobs and sharing heritage and craft skills alongside learning experiences for all ages."

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Bangor Baker Morgan's Journey with CAFRE, Loughry Campus

Morgan Coleman began his journey in the food industry by enrolling on the Foundation Degree in Food Innovation and Technology at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), following his studies at Bangor Academy.

Coming from a family who historically owned a bakery in Belfast and influenced by his mum, who still works in the food sector - Morgan has been surrounded by food from a young age.

Morgan is particularly interested in the scientific side of the food sector, with a strong focus on food microbiology. Studying at Loughry Campus enhances his learning by providing the knowledge and practical skills needed to develop and produce innovative, nutritious, and safe foods. This is reinforced through hands-on classes in Loughry's laboratories and Food Technology Centre, where students are encouraged to apply concepts in real-world settings. Industry talks and visits to agri-food companies across Northern Ireland further enhance the experience, offering valuable insight into modern manufacturing practices and potential career pathways.

Reflecting on his studies so far, Morgan commented: "At CAFRE, you get taught valuable skills for personal and professional development and get insight from businesses in the agri-food industry. The lecturers are helpful and always support you."

While Morgan enjoys the science behind food manufacturing, it is the bakery sector specifically that truly excites him. He currently works part time at Knotts Bakery, a Belfast business known for producing breads, pastries, and ready to eat products. "My part-time job is as a sales assistant - my roles include slicing and packaging breads, setting up the counter, packing and labelling products, serving customers, and keeping the place clean and tidy," he explains.

Morgan is currently preparing for his upcoming six month work placement, an essential component of the Foundation Degree that is designed to develop students' technical capability and commercial awareness. Hoping to continue his journey within the bakery sector, Morgan aims to move from retail into manufacturing.

Morgan said: "I hope to move into bakery manufacturing during my placement. I would like to work in operations to gain hands on experience in ingredient preparation and operating equipment. This will strengthen my understanding of good manufacturing practices and give me valuable insight into



CAFRE student Morgan Coleman, gaining practical skills and industry insight at Loughry Campus as he works towards securing a bakery manufacturing placement.

how products are produced on an industrial scale. The experience will support my studies when I return to CAFRE to complete my Foundation Degree."

Completing his placement will allow Morgan to deepen his understanding of bakery technology and gain experience in the complex processes required to consistently produce high quality, safe, baked goods. With his passion, growing experience, and industry focused education, Morgan is well on his way to building a promising career in the bakery sector.

If you or someone you

know thrives in a team environment, seeks a non-desk-bound career, enjoys practical problem-solving, values travel opportunities, and desires a challenging, yet rewarding career with promising job prospects, consider studying at CAFRE, Loughry Campus.

With a growing need for skilled and qualified professionals to drive innovation and promote sustainability in the agri-food industry, why not attend our Open Day on Tuesday 10 March at Loughry Campus to find out more about the courses in food we offer. Book your place at: www.cafre.ac.uk.



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Egan and Muir meet with Community Advice Ards and North Down (CAAND)

Connie Egan MLA and Andrew Muir MLA have welcomed the opportunity to meet with Community Advice Ards and North Down, discussing the wide range of services they provide to residents across North Down.

Following the meeting which took place on Friday 23rd January, 2026, Connie Egan MLA said, "Recently Andrew Muir MLA and I met with Derek McGregor, Manager of Community Advice Ards and North Down. My office works very closely with the team at CAAND to ensure people are supported when in need of financial advice or assistance with social security.

"We discussed the rising levels of need for support and advice



(L-R) Andrew Muir MLA, Derek McGregor and Connie Egan MLA following their meeting.

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services in our local community, something I reflected on when I brought a motion to the NI Assembly before Christmas on poverty in North Down. CAAND have an office just across from mine on Hamilton Road, you can call or email them at 03001239287 advice@caand.co.uk for free, confidential advice."

Andrew Muir MLA

added, "The service that is offered by Community Advice Ards and North Down is second to none, and I know from my own Constituency Office in Holywood, just how valued their support is by those who use it.

"Derek and the whole team at CAAND do truly incredible work, from helping people access their benefit entitlement to offering debt management advice. If anyone is in need of their support, I would highly recommend getting in touch, and Connie and I are also here to help constituents in need. It can be difficult to reach out for support, but doing so can make a real difference."

Ards and North Down Borough Council Becomes First Official Drop-Off Partner for The Hygiene Bank in Local Leisure Centres

Ards and North Down Borough Council is pleased to announce a new partnership with The Hygiene Bank - Ards and North Down Project, becoming the first local authority in Northern Ireland to host official donation drop-off points within

Collection boxes are now in place at Ards Blair Mayne Wellbeing and Leisure Complex, Comber Leisure Centre and Portaferry Sports Centre.

This initiative will support The Hygiene Bank's ongoing efforts to tackle hygiene poverty across Ards and North Down. The local project, run entirely by volunteers, has been serving the community for the past seven years, providing essential hygiene items to a wide network of community partners including foodbanks, community and church groups, schools, and other organisations supporting individuals and families facing hardship.

Mayor of Ards and North Down, Councillor Gillian McCollum, added, "We are proud to support The Hygiene Bank and the vital work it carries out across our Borough. Hygiene poverty is an issue that affects many households quietly but profoundly. By providing drop-off points in our leisure centres, we hope to make it easier for residents to donate and to help



Mayor of Ards and North Down, Councillor Gillian McCollum alongside (L-R), Councillor Rachel Ashe and Jean McGrogan, Hygiene Bank Ards and North Down Project.

ensure that essential items reach those who need them most. This partnership reflects our ongoing commitment to supporting community wellbeing and ensuring that no one in Ards and North Down goes without the basics."

Jean McGrogan, The Hygiene Bank Ards and North Down Project said,

"We, as volunteers with The Hygiene Bank, Ards and North Down Project, are very grateful to Ards

and North Down Borough Council for becoming the first Drop Off Points within the local Council Leisure Complexes. Each donation means so much to families who need our help, and this partnership will greatly enhance our ability to support those experiencing hygiene poverty."

The Hygiene Bank collects essential everyday items commonly found in homes, such as shower gel, shampoo, soap, toothpaste

and toothbrushes, toilet rolls, nappies and baby care essentials, household cleaning and laundry products.

Ards and North Down Borough Council encourages residents to donate what they can during their visit to one of the participating leisure centres.

For more information on The Hygiene Bank and how to get involved, please visit: www.thehygienebank.com.

RUGBY HERO PHIL RAISES ALMOST £3,000 FOR FORGET ME NOT

More familiar with tackling on the rugby pitch, Donaghadee's Phil Whyte laced up to 'tackle' one of his toughest challenges to date after he completed the notoriously challenging Tollymore Trail Marathon in Newcastle to raise funds for the Ulster Hospital's Forget Me Not group.

The group, established in Maternity Services in the South Eastern Trust, brings together parents who have experienced the loss of a baby or child, providing compassionate support throughout their grief journey.

The former Bangor rugby player, Phil completed the race

and raised over £2,800 to remember his baby daughter Sophie, who was born sleeping on 8 November 2019.

Phil explained how the Marathon took place on Sophie's anniversary and how he and his family wanted to give back to the Unit as their way of saying thanks for the support

they received when Sophie was born.

"The staff really looked after us when we lost Sophie at 37 weeks. We want to thank everyone who donated.

I wish I could do more and we hope that the funds raised will help both the Maternity Unit and Forget Me Not Group."

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Phil Whyte and his wife Carley with their children Jessica and Bradley

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Interim Lead Midwife, Sarah McKevitt added, "We are very grateful for the donation and it will go a long way to supporting our families and the staff to care for our parents.

It is lovely that Phil and Carley have come up to see us and give the Unit this very kind donation. We are very grateful."

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The South Eastern Trust's District Nursing Service makes a significant difference to the lives of patients and families across the Trust area, delivering safe, high-quality nursing care where it matters most, in patients' own homes.

The service provides care through a 'one team approach', with home recognised as the best and first place of care whenever possible.

District Nurses support adults over the age of 18 with a wide range of complex health needs, including wound management, palliative and end-of-life care, PICC line management, chronic disease management, medication administration and support for patients and their families to remain independent at home avoiding unnecessary hospital admissions.

Over the past four years, Tommy Greer from Donaghadee, has really benefitted from the District Nursing Service in the Trust.

Tommy explained, "The District Nursing Team has been amazing. They have been coming to me for the last four years and I could not do without them. They have really made a difference to my health, both mentally and physically. I need to have both my legs dressed and I do not have to go to hospital every time. The



L/R: Amy McAvoy (Senior Community Staff Nurse - Ards area), Gemma Ferguson (Locality Manager) and Sarah Jamison (Community Staff Nurse - Bangor)

District Nurses come out to my house. I would not be able to walk into the hospital or my GP surgery, so their support means everything to me. They are a fantastic Team, I would be lost without them."

District Nursing is unique in that it supports not only patients, but also their families and carers. Teams build strong therapeutic relationships,

often supporting people from the early stages of their illness.

Community Staff Nurse, Sarah Jamison, who works in the North Down area said, "I love the variety of District Nursing. No two days are the same and being able to deliver such a wide range of care in a home environment is really unique. It is a real honour to look after people where

they feel most comfortable. "One of the most rewarding aspects of the role is building relationships with patients. People are more relaxed at home and that allows you to really build trust and rapport. We are a vital link between GPs and other services and providing that primary care support to improve patients' lives is invaluable."

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- Emergency refuge accommodation
- Floating support service for women in the community
- Children's services
- Group support programmes including
 - Journey to Freedom
- One Stop Shop - free multi-agency drop in service
- Court support

Our range of Children's Services include:

- Art Workshops
- Helping Hands
- Transformers
- Healthy Relationship Programme

We also provide awareness raising sessions and training to our local community, schools, businesses and agencies.

One Stop Shop

A multi-agency drop-in service for women experiencing:

- Physical Abuse
- Financial Abuse
- Coercive control
- Sexual Abuse

The One Stop Shop provides FREE, immediate and confidential access to Women's Aid, legal support, benefits advice, housing support and safety advice.

10.00 am-12.00 noon

No appointment necessary

Crèche facilities are available

LOCATION: House Church, Crawfordsburn Road Newtownards, BT23 4EA

For any further information about the One Stop Shop or Women's Aid support services Contact us at 02891 273196

NEXT DATES:

March 10th & 24th

April 14th & 28th

Our sessions are held on the 2nd and 4th Tuesday of each month!

Too Many Lives Lost to Suicide: Stand with PIPS Charity. Demand Change.

New figures released by NISRA lay bare a devastating truth: 290 people were registered as having died by suicide in Northern Ireland in 2024. Each number represents a life, a family shattered, and a community left grieving.



Too many lives lost to suicide. Sign the petition.



Scan the QR code to sign.
or visit: www.pipscharity.com/standwithpips

Planting the seeds of hope.

028 9080 5850 | info@pipscharity.com | www.pipscharity.com

This is not a statistic to be quietly absorbed — it is an urgent warning.

In response, PIPS Suicide Prevention Charity has launched its campaign, “Too Many Lives Lost to Suicide. Stand with PIPS Charity. Demand Change.” It comes at a critical moment, as the delivery of Northern Ireland’s Mental Health Strategy — a strategy designed to reform services and save lives — faces severe disruption due to funding cuts. At a time when demand is rising, within a broken Mental

Health system “

“These 290 lives mattered,” said Renée Quinn, CEO of PIPS Charity. “Without proper investment in Crisis community Mental Health Services, our services are being stretched beyond breaking point. Our communities deserve better than the cuts being imposed upon us as it places more people at risk. How can we face those who come after us and admit we did enough?”

Though PIPS receives no government funding

for its core services, it continues to absorb increasing pressure from long NHS waiting lists and overstretched statutory services. The charity warns that without a properly structured and resourced mental health system, every organisation — and every family — will continue to feel the strain.

Mental health support is not optional; it is a human right. Scaling back risks undoing years of hard work and will inevitably cost more lives. As a

society we simply cannot afford to step backwards.

Every number is a name. Every statistic is a story. Every life lost is one too many.

If you believe every life should be protected, if you believe mental health services must be funded — stand with PIPS today.

Scan the QR code, sign the petition, and add your voice to the demand for change.

Hope cannot be scaled back.

Link to petition: <https://c.org/BstPKMTc8f>

5 Star care at Helens Bay Dental

Helens Bay Dental Practice frequently emerges in patient narratives as a place that genuinely transforms confidence and well-being.

Reviewers often speak of life-changing outcomes—from implants that restore chewing function to cosmetic treatments that revive self-esteem

• One patient shared how broken front teeth were fixed with “three implants to carry five front teeth,” enabling them to eat comfortably and smile radiantly. The whole process was praised as “very efficient, pain free” with “a new lease of life”

• Another described overcoming discoloration, unevenness, and gaps through whitening, implants, and fillings—a journey so successful they “no longer ashamed to let people see” their smile

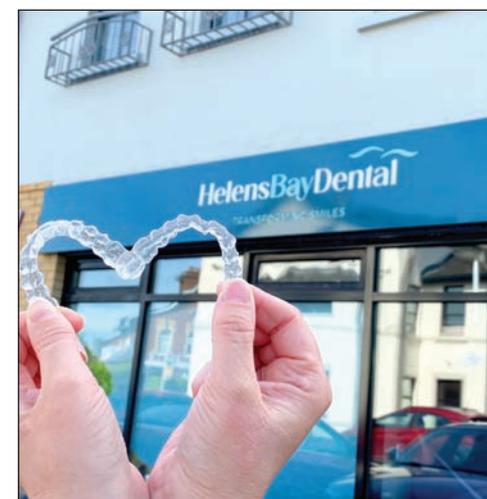
• Cosmetic cases also thrive, such as Invisalign or Six Month Smile users who highlight how previously camera-shy individuals now

feel able to flash genuine grins: “now I have straight teeth and I couldn’t be happier”

Across 269 Google reviews, the practice consistently earns five-star praise for its clean, welcoming environment and gentle, professional staff. Recent reviews underscore that the team—especially the hygienists—deliver dependable, reassuring care: “Staff are very pleasant ... I felt at ease,” and “Seamless as always”

In essence, a visit to Helens Bay Dental not only addresses practical dental needs but often leads to profound personal transformation—granting renewed comfort, confidence and a smile patients are proud to share.

Call to arrange a Complimentary visit with



one of the Treatment coordinators to find out how you can improve your Dental health and upgrade your smile

02891 853304 ask for

Victoria the New Patient Coordinator

Email info@helensbaydental.co.uk

Find [helensbaydental](https://www.facebook.com/helensbaydental) on Facebook and Instagram

Wading for Worms – the Oystercatcher

Peep peep peep peep peep peeppeep peeppeeppeep...

I heard them before I saw them. It was not until I reached the field gate off this narrow country road that I was able to watch them scurrying around, feeding along with a flock of rooks and a couple of jackdaws, digging into the ground with their massive, red/orange beaks and pausing only to call...peep peep peep...

The rooks were disciplined, moving steadily forward, probing for worms and other invertebrates in and under the grass, only occasionally breaking their rhythm to lunge at a straying jackdaw or one of their own but further down the pecking order.

In contrast, the oystercatchers behaved much as they would along a rocky beach, hurrying from one prospective feeding spot to another, basically all over the place, but clearly intent on finding food in late winter when storms or high tides might have restricted availability along the coast, a few miles away.



Oystercatchers are rather stocky waders, easily told apart from other wader kin such as turnstones and curlews by their larger size, striking black and white plumage, and that piercing piping call.

Around 60,000 oystercatchers spend the winter around the Irish coasts, the residents supplemented by migrants from Iceland and Norway. While their numbers are in decline, they are still relatively common and easily recognised, and certainly one of the waders that I enjoy seeing and hearing.

Although they will

occasionally visit farmland to feed...and in the past few decades have been seen breeding and feeding at inland loughs.... they are primarily birds of the marine edge. Despite their name, they seldom eat oysters, preferring cockles and mussels which they prise or break open using that massive, pointed beak, their diet supplemented by lugworms and other large invertebrates.

Winter is a great time to visit our coasts to see and hear the myriad waders and other water birds which find food and shelter here to sustain them until spring.

JVA

Mar 19

Ards and North Down Job Fair

Ards Blair Mayne Wellbeing and Leisure Complex, Newtownards
Thursday 19 March 2026, 11.00am - 2.00pm
Free Admission

Find job opportunities and improve your employment prospects with practical advice and support

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Benefit customers may get help with travel costs to the event



For more information: JobApplyNI.com or email dfcemployerservices@communities-ni.gov.uk

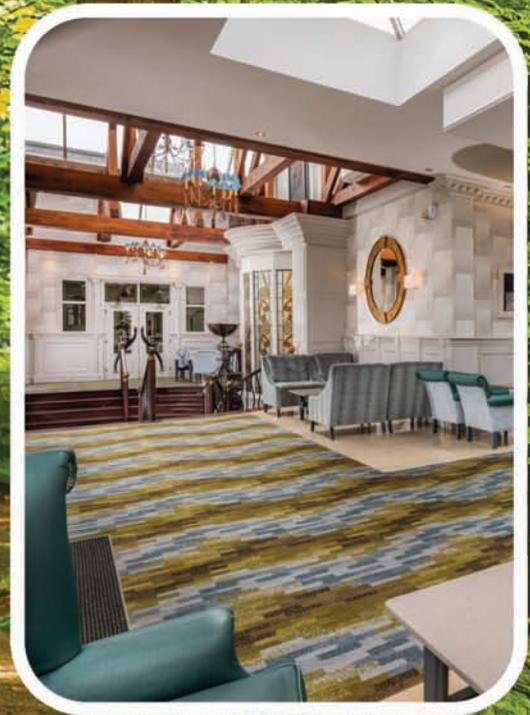






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North Down and Ards Women's Aid

North Down and Ards Women's Aid provides a vital service to women and children affected by domestic and sexual abuse.

Our vision for WA is the elimination of domestic abuse, but this is a collective responsibility. Domestic abuse is not just a legal or justice issue; it is a cultural and societal problem. We must all work together to end domestic abuse and violence against women and girls. Partnership working is vital in eliminating domestic abuse."

Domestic abuse can include, but is not limited to, the following:

- Coercive Control (a pattern of intimidation, degradation, isolation and control with the use or threat of physical or sexual abuse.
- Psychological and / or emotional abuse
- Physical or sexual abuse
- Financial or economic abuse
- Harassment and stalking
- Online or digital abuse.

For North Down & Ards Women's Aid, in the last



financial year, we had 473 women referred into our floating support service, this was a 7.3% increase from the year before. We had 68 women referred into our refuge, which was a 35.5% increase. Of this number, 91 women were from the rural area.

NDAWA offer safe, confidential and non-judgemental support for you, whether you are still in your relationship or have left. Not everyone wants to stay in refuges, but you can still get support if planning to leave an abusive relationship or help with safer coping strategies to stay.

If you would like more information about NDAWA services, or the One Stop Shop, please contact NDAWA on 028 9127 3196 or email info@ndawomensaid.org

Gilmore Funeral Directors Ltd: A Trusted Legacy in Comber

Gilmore Funeral Directors Ltd is a well-established, third-generation independent family business in Comber, offering compassionate and professional funeral services.

Established in 1987, the company has built a strong reputation for providing personalised and supportive care during life's most difficult times.

The business is run by Ken Gilmore Dip.F.D., who has over 45 years of experience, and his son Mark Gilmore BIE, who has over 25 years. Their philosophy is simple and heartfelt, captured in their motto: "Our family is here to look after your family when you need us most."

As one of the few fully qualified funeral directors in Northern Ireland, Ken Gilmore has remained

independent in the face of corporate buyouts, allowing him to keep costs as much as 35% lower than larger groups.

Gilmore Funeral Directors understands that every funeral is unique. Their dedicated team works closely with families to create a meaningful and memorable service that reflects the life and wishes of the deceased, from traditional funerals to contemporary celebrations of life.

Their comprehensive services include:

- Funeral planning and arrangement

- Direct cremations
- Burial and cremation services

- Live stream of services
- Floral arrangements and transportation

- Memorials, including headstone erection, lettering, and cleaning
- Repatriation to any country

- Grief support and bereavement advice
- Guidance on DHSS grants

The company's facilities include a modern, custom-built memorial hall that can accommodate more than 100 people, providing a tranquil environment for

services. They are also an appointed representative for Golden Charter pre-paid funeral plans, enabling individuals to plan and pay for their arrangements in advance. Gilmore Funeral Directors is a trusted member of both the National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD) and the Society of Independent Funeral Directors (SAIF).

Gilmore Funeral Directors Ltd was a proud winner at the inaugural Funeral Awards Northern Ireland 2024, where company director Ken Gilmore received the



prestigious Lifetime Service Award, and the company was named Independent Funeral Director of the Year 2024.

For more information or to arrange a meeting,

you can contact Gilmore Funeral Directors at:

Address: 1 Kilinchy Street, Comber, BT23 5AP
Phone: 028 9187 2949

Website: <https://gilmore-funeraldirectors.co.uk>

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.

The vet market is dominated by six large veterinary groups[3], 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[4] 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[5] since 2020.

Across its 73 vet clinics nationwide[6], 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[7] 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[8].

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Living on the Edge: Fairhead Glamping Pods

Perched atop the rugged basalt cliffs of County Antrim, Fairhead Glamping Pods offers a rare blend of wild isolation and modern comfort.

Situated on a historic working farm that has been in the McCarr family for generations, these two luxury pods provide a front-row seat to the raw beauty of the North Coast.

The Glamping site is on Fairhead (Benmore) and is located just past Coolanlough, which is a clachan (small group of old cottages) and looks out over one of three lakes at Fairhead. Lough na Cranagh has a crannog (a manmade island) in the middle of it. The crannog in the lake dates back to approximately the 1600s and, reportedly, was built by one of the McDonnell chieftains who apparently had a house and land on Fairhead.

From your private balcony, you can watch the mist roll over the water or look across the North

Channel toward the Mull of Kintyre in Scotland and Rathlin Island. It is a place designed for slow mornings and fireside evenings, where the only neighbours you're likely to encounter are the local livestock roaming the fields. Unlike traditional camping, this experience is defined by underfloor heating, private en-suite bathrooms, and kitchenettes that make the Atlantic breeze feel much more inviting.

For those seeking adventure, the surrounding landscape is a playground of dramatic heights and cinematic views. The Fairheadcliffs themselves are a world-class destination for climbers and hikers, offering 600-foot drops that provided a moody backdrop for Game of Thrones. A short drive



leads you to Murlough Bay, a hidden coastal gem where the steep, winding road reveals some of the most striking vistas in the country.

Venturing further toward the North West along the Causeway Coastal Route, you'll find the charming harbour town of Ballycastle, famous for its seafood and the ferry to Rathlin. Continuing west, the iconic Giant's

Causeway and the ruins of Dunluce Castle await before the road eventually leads to Portrush, Portstewart and finally the historic walled city of Derry. Whether you are chasing myths at the Causeway or history in the city, returning to the silence of Fairhead is the perfect way to end a day of exploration.

<https://fairheadglampingpods.com/>

Station House Hotel Offers a Welcoming Spring Retreat

As brighter evenings stretch across Donegal and the first warmth of spring returns, there is perhaps no better time to rediscover the simple pleasure of a well-earned escape.

In the heart of Letterkenny, the Station House Hotel offers just that - a welcoming base from which to relax, reconnect and explore.

Built on the site of the original Old Station House, this hotel combines historic charm with modern comfort. Since opening in 2006, it has become a beloved landmark in Letterkenny, offering 81 spacious bedrooms, the Depot Bar & Restaurant, and conference and banqueting facilities.

Proud winner of TripAdvisor's Travellers' Choice and Certificate of Excellence for 14 years in a row, the Station House Hotel is recognised for delivering unforgettable guest experiences. With top ratings on Google and TripAdvisor, you can be assured of exceptional service every time.

Step outside and find

yourself in the centre of everything - from shopping and dining to culture and entertainment. Enjoy easy access to attractions like An Griánán Theatre, Century Cinema, and the best nightlife, or use the hotel as your base to explore all that Donegal has to offer. From Glenveagh National Park to Sliabh League Cliffs and Blue Flag beaches, the Station House is your gateway to one of Ireland's most stunning counties. Whether you're in the mood for adventure, a round of golf, or peaceful walks in nature, it's all within reach.

The hotel offers a variety of room types to suit every need. Including Executive, Double, Twin, Triple, Family, Interconnecting, and Accessible rooms - all spacious and designed with your comfort in mind.

Dine Like a Local! Home to the Depot Bar



and Restaurant, the Station House is proud to offer a warm, welcoming atmosphere paired with a menu full of mouth-watering choices. Known as one of Letterkenny's best spots to eat and unwind, it's a favourite among locals and visitors alike.

Golden Years Offer - Exceptional Value. Take advantage of their exclusive Golden Years Offer - the perfect opportunity to

enjoy great value with no prepayment required. Simply book now to secure your preferred dates and pay when you arrive.

As spring unfolds, the Station House Hotel stands ready to welcome guests old and new. Book today and experience the warmth, charm, and hospitality that makes the Station House Hotel one of Letterkenny's most loved destinations. A warm welcome awaits you.





Fairhead Glamping Pods is Located among the finest of natural beauty

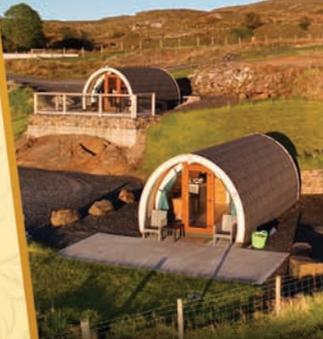
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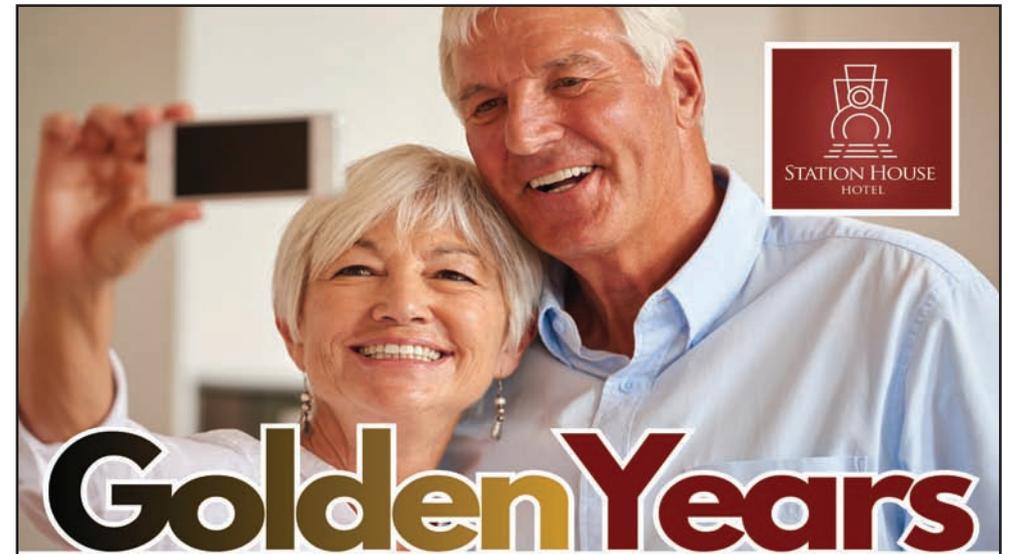





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Station House Hotel, Lower Main Street, Letterkenny, Co. Donegal, F92 ERV1

NEWS FROM THE CHIP STOP AND THE PHAT FRYER

Since opening its doors in Autumn 2025, The Phat Fryer has quickly become a staple of the Bangor food scene.

But while the name might be new to the Gransha Road, the expertise behind the counter certainly isn't.

As the sister business to the legendary The Chip Stop—which has been open on the Belfast Road for nine successful years—The Phat Fryer carries a serious pedigree for frying.

At both businesses the focus remains on the holy trinity of a great chippy: perfectly battered cod, generous portions, and freshly cut chips.

The Phat Fryer Goes Digital In a move that's

making life a whole lot easier for the hungry masses, The Phat Fryer has officially launched its brand-new app!

Android Users: You are officially in the "VIP Lane." The app is live on the Google Play Store right now. Fewer clicks, faster orders, and more grub heading your way.

iOS Crew: Don't panic! Apple is reportedly "a bit busy" (their words, probably), but(at time of print) the app is approved and just waiting in the queue. You'll be live very soon—stay tuned!

Delivery Has Landed (And it's a Bargain!)

If you don't feel like leaving the sofa, The Phat Fryer has you covered. Delivery has officially launched, running Tuesday through Saturday from 5:00 PM.

To celebrate the launch, they are offering a massive deal: Delivery for only 99p! Whether you're ordering via the new Android app or through their website, you can now get those freshly cut chips delivered straight to your door without breaking the bank.

The first move belongs to the snowdrops. These are the undisputed MVPs of the season, equipped with a natural "antifreeze" that lets

Discover Glasgow the Easy Way with HANNON Coach & Sail

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.

Now departing from the new Belfast Grand Central Station, this award-winning service offers a smooth coach-and-ferry journey straight into Glasgow city centre, making it the perfect alternative to flying. Already a firm favourite with seasoned travellers, the Belfast-Glasgow Express is proudly rated 5-Star on TripAdvisor.

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.

With a simple flat fare of just £47, including ferry travel and luggage, the 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).

hannoncoach.com, or by phone through HANNON's friendly booking team on 028 9265 0700 (Monday-Friday).

THE FIRST SIGNS OF SPRING

Winter doesn't exit with a grand flourish; it retreats with a slow, muddy exhale. In the countryside, spring isn't a single date on a calendar but a series of subtle "handshakes" between the earth and the sun.

If you're tired of the grey-scale landscape, it's time to stop looking for big changes and start noticing the small, quiet rebellions against the frost.

The first move belongs to the snowdrops. These are the undisputed MVPs of the season, equipped with a natural "antifreeze" that lets

them punch through frozen soil without shattering. They are soon joined by the "green mist"—that strange, ethereal aura that settles over the treeline. It isn't an optical illusion; it's the result of sap rising and millions of tiny buds swelling simultaneously, changing the horizon's color before a single leaf has even unfurled.

Look toward the hedgerows and you'll

see hazel catkins, often called "lamb's tails," dancing in the wind. These long, yellow-green tassels are designed to flick pollen into the breeze before the summer foliage grows thick enough to block its path. On the ground, the yellow stars of Celandines begin to pepper the ditches. These are the countryside's sun-seekers, opening wide during bright spells and clamping shut the



APRIL COUNTRY MUSIC WEEKEND

APRIL 10TH - APRIL 12TH 2026

THE ABBEY HOTEL DONEGAL

FRIDAY 10TH APRIL 2026



JACK KEOGH
9.15PM - 11.15PM



JIMMY BUCKLEY
11.30PM - 1.30AM



STUART MOYLES
1.30AM

SATURDAY 11TH APRIL 2026



CHLOE SWEENEY
2.30PM - 4.30PM



GAVIN GRIBBEN
9.15PM - 11.15PM



MICHAEL ENGLISH
11.30PM - 1.30AM



JACK LARRY
1.30AM

SUNDAY 12TH APRIL 2026



PATRICK FEENEY
3.00PM - 5.00PM



KIERAN MCAREE
9.00PM - 11.00PM

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moment a cloud dares to pass over.

The silence of winter breaks first in the canopy. The "Dawn Chorus" returns, led by the Great Tit's rhythmic, two-note "teacher-teacher" call. You'll notice a new, frantic energy as rooks squabble over nesting rights in the treetops and blackbirds dart through the undergrowth with beaks full of dried grass. Even the water stirs; clumps of frogspawn—clear jelly with obsidian centers—appear in the shallows of ponds, signaling that the underwater world has officially woken up.

Finally, there is the scent. As the soil warms and dries, it releases a distinct, earthy perfume known as petrichor. It's a primitive aroma that signals the ground is ready to support life again. Combined with the sight of "wobbly" newborn lambs in the fields, these signs confirm that the cycle has turned. Spring is here—you just have to look down at the ditches and up at the buds to see it.

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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 experts are calling the 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.

Sculptural Forms and Modern Medievalism

Furniture silhouettes are taking a dramatic turn this season, showcasing a fascinating clash between the heavy and the soft. On one hand, we see the rise of Modern Medieval influences, which utilise dark woods, wrought iron accents, and protective, grounded shapes. On the other hand, there is a continued obsession with “fat” furniture—sculptural

armchairs and sofas with exaggerated curves and “chubby” profiles that command attention. This mix of architectural edges and oversized comfort represents a departure from the “Modern Farmhouse” look, moving instead towards a sense of curated character that blends 1970s retro-pop with genuine antiques.

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.

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Mellow Yellow: Bringing the Sun Indoors for Spring

After months of gray skies and heavy wool blankets, the first hint of spring feels like a long-overdue exhale.

While we wait for the world outside to fully bloom, there is no better way to kickstart the season than by introducing a “pop” of yellow into your living space. Yellow is the undisputed heavyweight champion of the color wheel when it comes to boosting mood and energy, but it is also a color that demands respect. Use too much, and your living room feels like the inside of a school bus; use just enough, and it feels like a sun-drenched sanctuary.

Soft Transitions with Textiles

The easiest—and most budget-friendly—way to invite yellow into your home is through soft goods. If your sofa is a neutral gray, navy, or cream, it is the perfect canvas for a few butter-yellow throw pillows or a lightweight lemon-coloured knit blanket. Textiles allow you to experiment with different shades, from bold neon to a sophisticated mustard, without the commitment

of a paintbrush. The key here is texture; a velvet yellow cushion adds a touch of luxury, while a linen throw feels casual and airy, perfect for those first few afternoons when you can finally crack a window open.

Beyond the living room, consider the impact of yellow in the kitchen or dining area. Swapping out tired white tea towels for a vibrant saffron print or laying a pale yellow table runner can instantly brighten a space

that often feels purely functional. These small shifts don’t require a total overhaul of your existing decor; they simply act as “highlighters” for the furniture you already love.

The Natural Glow: Flora and Fruit

Sometimes the best decor isn’t found in the furniture aisle, but in the produce section or the garden. A bowl of fresh lemons on a kitchen island is perhaps the oldest trick in the interior design book, but it remains a classic for a reason. It provides a natural, organic pop of color that feels intentional rather than cluttered. Similarly, spring is the season of the daffodil, the tulip, and the forsythia branch. A simple glass vase filled with yellow blooms provides an instant focal point and a scent that reminds you that winter is officially in the rearview mirror.

If you have a bit of a “black thumb” and struggle to keep flowers alive, consider botanical prints or dried florals. A single framed print of a yellow wildflower or a vase of dried Billy Balls (Craspedia) offers that same sunny hue with zero maintenance. These natural elements help bridge the gap between

your indoor environment and the awakening world outside, making the transition into spring feel seamless.

Functional Pops and Focal Points

For those feeling a bit bolder, look for one “functional” item to serve as your yellow anchor. This could be a sunny yellow ceramic lamp on a side table, a stack of books with yellow spines on a shelf, or even a small accent chair in a reading nook. Because yellow is such a high-energy colour, it works exceptionally well in transitional spaces like entryways. A yellow umbrella stand or a bright welcome mat serves as a cheery “hello” to guests before they even step fully into your home.

Lastly, don’t overlook the power of hardware and small details. Changing out the knobs on a plain white dresser for yellow ceramic ones, or adding a yellow tray to your coffee table to corral remotes and coasters, can make a surprising difference. These tiny interventions prove that you don’t need a massive budget or a gallon of paint to change the “temperature” of a room—sometimes, you just need a little bit of sunshine in the right place.

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CREATIVE BATHROOM DESIGN

Designing a bathroom is essentially a high-stakes puzzle where the pieces are made of porcelain and the mistakes can leak through your floorboards.

It is the one space in your home where “good enough” plumbing or a “mostly right” layout can lead to expensive headaches down the road. Whether you’re dreaming of a spa-like sanctuary or a high-efficiency family hub, the secret to success lies in balancing the technical demands of moisture and drainage with the aesthetic goals of a modern home.

Before you fall in love with a specific shade of artisan tile, you must nail down the floor plan. The golden rule of bathroom design is to respect the “wet zone” logic: moving plumbing lines—specifically the stack for the toilet or the drain for the shower—is the quickest way to vaporize your budget. If you can keep the fixtures in their original spots, you can redirect those savings into high-end finishes. When planning the space, try to avoid making the toilet the focal point. Tucking it behind a vanity or a stylish half-wall ensures that the first thing you see when you open the door isn’t a porcelain throne.

Furthermore, clearance is the difference between a room that feels luxurious and one that feels like a closet. You generally want at least 30 inches of clear space in front of the toilet and vanity to allow for comfortable movement. This also includes checking the

“swing radius” of your door; nothing ruins a sleek design faster than a door that bangs into the vanity or a glass shower partition every time someone enters.

One single overhead light is the natural enemy of a functional bathroom. It creates harsh, vertical shadows that make shaving or applying makeup nearly impossible. Instead, think of your lighting as a “layer cake.” You want task lighting, such as sconces placed at eye level on either side of the mirror, to provide even illumination across your face. This is supplemented by ambient lighting, usually in the form of recessed ceiling lights on a dimmer switch, which allows you to shift the mood from “bright morning routine” to “relaxed evening soak.” For a touch of hotel-inspired luxury, consider accent lighting like an LED strip under a floating vanity or inside a shower niche to provide a soft glow during the night.



A bathroom is a brutal environment of high moisture and constant temperature swings, so your material choices need to be as durable as they are beautiful. While marble is a classic choice, it is porous and prone to etching from something as simple as a splash of toothpaste. Quartz is often the smarter alternative for countertops because it is non-porous and virtually stain-

resistant. For flooring, porcelain tile is the industry standard for a reason; it is denser and more waterproof than standard ceramic, making it the ideal candidate for a high-traffic “splash zone.” Ventilation is arguably the least “sexy” part of a remodel, but it is the most critical for the room’s longevity. Without a high-quality exhaust fan to clear humidity, even

the most expensive wallpaper will peel and mould will eventually crash the party. When shopping for a fan, look

for a low “sone” rating to ensure it operates at a whisper rather than a roar. A smart pro tip is to install the fan on a timer switch so it can continue to run for 20 minutes after you’ve finished your shower, ensuring the air is completely dry before the fan shuts off.

Finally, keep clutter at bay by building in

“invisible” storage. Rather than relying on plastic hanging racks that clutter your shower, have your contractor build a recessed niche between the wall studs for soaps and shampoos. You can apply this same logic to medicine cabinets—modern versions can be recessed into the wall so they sit flush

with the tile, providing hidden storage without the bulky profile of a traditional cabinet. To go the extra mile, ask your electrician to install a power outlet inside a vanity drawer; this allows you to keep hair dryers and electric toothbrushes plugged in and tucked away, keeping your countertops pristine.

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'FIELD TO FORK' PROGRAMME

Mash Direct, the award-winning Northern Ireland food producer, has partnered with the Learning and Engagement team from W5, Northern Ireland's award winning science and discovery centre, to launch the 'Field to Fork' education programme, an interactive initiative helping children understand where their food comes from and the role of sustainable farming.

The pilot scheme has now officially launched and is already being delivered in local classrooms, with visits completed at Comber, Kilcooley and Carrowdore Primary Schools. Pupils have been taking part in hands-on activities that bring the journey of food from field to plate to life, exploring growing conditions, soil health, climate and environmental impact while making clear links between science and the food they eat every day. Delivered by W5's expert Learning and Engagement team and sponsored by

Mash Direct, the free programme engages pupils from ten local primary schools, particularly in areas of higher social deprivation. The sessions are curriculum-linked, hands-on, and designed to spark curiosity and highlight the journey from farm to plate. The pilot includes practical activities such as:

- Growing vegetables from seed and observing how soil and climate affect growth
- Cooking and tasting traditional potato bread

- Exploring balanced nutrition with the Eatwell Plate
 - Investigating food miles and sustainable farming practices
 - Creating video stories to share learnings
- Research underscores the importance of initiatives like this. According to the British Nutrition Foundation (BNF), nearly one in five primary-school children believe fish fingers come from chicken, and close to a third think cheese comes from plants - highlighting a widespread lack of

understanding of food origins. Meanwhile, the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) reports that after using its "Food - a fact of life" resources, 85% of pupils were more informed about where food comes from. As a pilot scheme, this initiative is sowing the seeds for a broader educational rollout, one that could transform how young people understand food, health and sustainability from the field all the way to their fork.



W5 Learning & Education Team, Mash Direct, Comms & Events Executive and Pupils from Kilcooley Primary School

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Spring into Comfort at the Four Seasons Hotel & Leisure Club, Monaghan

Spring is a season for new beginnings, longer days, and the simple joy of a well-earned break. This year, the Four Seasons Hotel & Leisure Club, Monaghan, is inviting guests to embrace the season with its Spring Season Bed & Breakfast Sale — The best way to enjoy a relaxing getaway without the stress.

Nestled in the heart of County Monaghan, the Four Seasons Hotel & Leisure Club has long been celebrated for its warm, welcoming atmosphere and commitment to comfort. The Spring Bed & Breakfast offer gives guests the opportunity to enjoy a refreshing escape, with cosy overnight accommodation and a full Irish breakfast each morning — The

perfect start to your day of relaxation or exploration. Guests can take advantage of the hotel's Leisure Club facilities, including a swimming pool, sauna, and steam room, ideal for easing away winter stiffness and welcoming the new season. For those who prefer a gentler pace, the hotel offers peaceful spaces to unwind with a book, enjoy a coffee in the lounge, or simply soak in the serene surroundings.

enthusiasts can explore local galleries, heritage sites, and seasonal events, while those who enjoy shopping will find charming independent stores and artisan boutiques just a short stroll away. The area is also perfect for gentle walks, scenic drives, or even a day trip to nearby attractions — All easily accessible and welcoming to visitors of all ages.

a weekend retreat, or a short adventure to reconnect with friends and family, the Four Seasons Hotel & Leisure Club offers an experience that's both rejuvenating and stress-free. With spring in the air, there's no better time to treat yourself to a well-deserved break. Take advantage of the Spring Season Bed & Breakfast Sale today and discover why Monaghan is the perfect destination for relaxation, culture, and gentle exploration. Book now and welcome the season with warmth, comfort, and a touch of



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What makes the Spring Bed & Breakfast Sale truly special is its combination of quality, comfort, and value. Whether you're planning a midweek escape,

RECOVERY THROUGH MUSIC CD LAUNCH

A singing-for-health group, Voice of Hope, run by the Wellness Recovery Network within the South Eastern Trust has launched a new CD 'Turn the Key' inspired by members' personal journeys of mental health recovery.

The Voice of Hope singing group has empowered individuals to rebuild confidence, rediscover their voices and reconnect with others through the shared joy of music, with partici-

pants experiencing positive impacts on their overall mental health and wellbeing. Their new album, 'Turn the Key', features original songs inspired by local landscapes and lived experi-

ence, giving voice to those who have walked the path of recovery. The songs reflect resilience, community and the belief that everyone has the power to "turn the key" and change the direction of their lives.

The CD launch marked the next step in the group's development and demonstrates the power of creative arts in supporting mental wellbeing.

ence, Anuk said, "Being part of Voice of Hope has helped me reconnect with music and with myself. Being part of the creation of Song of Hope was incredibly meaningful and reminded me that recovery is possible."

The dedication shown by group members throughout the project was evident in the growth of their musical skills, confidence and recovery journeys.

For many involved in the group, the experience of recording the CD proved truly life-changing.

Over the years, Voice of Hope has performed at events across the Trust, promoting messages of hope, recovery and connection.

The Wellness Recovery Network delivers creative and support programmes across the South Eastern Trust and has been working in partnership with The Right Key CIC, specialists in singing for health workshops.

The CD is priced at £10 and copies can be requested by contacting wellnessrecoverynetwork@setrust.hscni.net or (07713) 088 676.

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Spring Adventures: Family Events in Ards & North Down (March–May 2026)

As the days stretch out and the first snowdrops begin to peek through in Nugent's Wood, the local area comes alive with a packed calendar of family-friendly activities.

From the shores of Strangford Lough to the bustling streets of Bangor and Holywood, here is your ultimate guide to what's on for families this spring.

March: Culture, Craic, and Coastal Walks

- **Young Aspects Festival** (Feb 27 – March 1): Wrap up the tail end of this youth literature festival in Bangor. Expect cozy bedtime stories, bookbinding workshops, and character creation sessions perfect for budding authors and artists.

- **St. Patrick's Weekend** (March 14–17): * Newtownards & Bangor: Catch "Cap on the Wall" for a night of Irish dancing and music featuring All-Ireland champions and Riverdance stars.

- **Trad Trails:** Follow the music through local venues as the borough celebrates Ireland's patron saint with pop-up performances and family fun days.

- **Arts Night at the Museum** (Friday, March 20): Visit

the North Down Museum in Bangor for a special late-night opening filled with interactive art and history.

- **Spring Solstice with NI Opera** (March 20): A unique musical experience to welcome the new season, often held in atmospheric local heritage sites.

April: Easter Egg-stravaganzas

- **National Trust Easter Trails** (March 28 – April 7):

- **Mount Stewart:** The world-class gardens host a nature-inspired Easter trail. Kids can earn a chocolate treat (with vegan options available) while exploring the whimsical topiary and lake walks.

- **Castle Ward:** Head further down the coast for a "long-eared" adventure in the sprawling 18th-century estate.

- **Ark Open Farm Easter Extravaganza** (Two Weeks in April): Always a hit with toddlers and primary schoolers, the farm features a Dino Egg Trail, the

chance to meet the Easter Bunny, and—the highlight of spring—bottle-feeding newborn lambs.



chance to meet the Easter Bunny, and—the highlight of spring—bottle-feeding newborn lambs.

- **Ards International Guitar Festival** (April 15–19): For families with older children or music lovers, this festival brings world-class talent to Newtownards for workshops and concerts.

- **Pet Nose Day at Mount Stewart** (April 25): A quirky day out where your four-legged family members are the guests of honor.

May: Maypoles and Mari-time Magic

- **Hollywood Merry May Day** (Monday, May 4): This is one of Ireland's oldest traditions. The town center is pedestrianized for a day of:

- **Maypole Dancing:** Watch local schoolchildren perform traditional routines around the UK's only town-centre maypole.

- **Fancy Dress & Street Theatre:** Don't miss the crowning of the May Queen and the "Bonnie Baby" competition.

- **Donaghadee Moat & Camera Obscura:** Reopen-

ing in May for the summer season, the Moat offers incredible views across the Irish Sea—a great spot for a family picnic.

- **Coastal Adventure at Pickie Funpark:** While open year-round, May is the perfect time to hop on the iconic Pickie Swans or try the splash pad on a sunny afternoon in Bangor.

- **Exploris Aquarium:** Located in Portaferry, spring is a great time to visit the seal sanctuary to see the pups before they are released back into the wild.

ACTION CANCER'S MOTHER'S DAY WALK IS A REAL FAMILY AFFAIR

'Walk with her, walk to remember her'

Action Cancer's much-loved Mother's Day 5K Walk returns to the beautiful surrounds of Lurgan Park on Saturday 14 March 2026. The event welcomes anyone wishing to come together with family and friends ahead of Mothering Sunday, offering a chance to spend time in a peaceful, reflective setting, walking with loved ones or in memory of those who are no longer here.

This 5K walk, supported by local company Country Kitchen, is organised by the Action Cancer Lurgan Fundraising Group. All money raised will support Action Cancer which includes the continued delivery of its therapeutic and support services currently available in Lurgan and the surrounding area.

Early Bird registration is now open at £10 per adult (general registration is £15), with children under 16 free. Once registered, walkers will receive an information

pack, sponsor form and fundraising materials. Participants are encouraged, where possible, to raise £120 in sponsorship, which will cover the cost of a breast screening for a local woman.

Action Cancer delivers life saving prevention, detection, and therapeutic services that are unique within Northern Ireland and free to those who need them most.

Action Cancer's comprehensive range of cancer detection, prevention and support services, cost £4 million annually to deliver. Every year Action Cancer, through the support of public donations, helps to save and support 15,000 people face-to-face across Northern Ireland through the delivery of its services.

Action Cancer's offering also includes; acupuncture, scar therapy, yoga, one-to-one and group life coaching, and educational events. Its Health Promotion

programme delivers practical guidance on reducing cancer risk through lifestyle choices, alongside M.O.T. health checks as well as running nutrition and exercise programmes for people affected by cancer. Action Cancer also offers a skin cancer detection service.

Services are delivered at Action Cancer House in Belfast, selected regional venues including Mount Zion House in Lurgan, and onboard the Action Cancer Big Bus, (supported by SuperValu and Centra).

Anyone affected by cancer who wishes to book an appointment can do so at www.actioncancer.org or by calling 028 9080 3344.

EVENT DETAILS
 Action Cancer's Mother's Day Walk, Saturday 14 March 2026

Lurgan Park, Windsor Avenue

On-the-day registration: 11am

Walk begins: 12noon

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Education Minister Paul Givan has recently officially launched a new online Digital Proficiency Course aimed at educating pupils and wider school communities on keeping safe online.

Provided through the Safer Schools NI platform, the Digital Proficiency Course has been designed to provide the practical tools and knowledge to empower children and young people to stay safe online.

The course has been made freely available to all education settings, pupils and parents across Northern Ireland.

Paul Givan said: "Our children and young people are engaging daily with technology, social media, and digital platforms at increasingly younger ages, and while some of these technologies offer benefits and create opportunities, they also contain potentially harmful risks.

"It is vital that we provide our schools with the resources that can support teachers and education staff to equip children and young people with the skills to navigate the digital and online world. Educating and empowering school communities is key to ensure pupils know how to access support from trusted adults or to report content when it makes them feel unsafe.

"The Safer Schools Digital Proficiency Course has been developed and designed to address this need."

The Minister continued: "This new course is part of the wider response to keeping our children safe online and compliments existing advice, guidance and information on a range of safeguarding issues available on the Safer Schools platform. I am delighted to launch the Digital Proficiency Course, and I would encourage all schools to register and sign up for this free initiative."

Colin Stitt, Head of Safer Schools, INEQUE Safeguarding Group said: "Decades ago, 'Cycling Proficiency' taught us to navigate the physical world safely; today, that 'road' has become digital. The Digital Proficiency Course is an age-appropriate, episodic video-based programme based on the five 'Five Cs' of online risk - Content, Contact, Conduct, Commerce, and Cyber Security. This certified course is free to access for parents, carers, pupils and school staff on the Safer Schools NI web and mobile app. The digital 'road' may have changed, but our collective commitment to safeguarding our children should always remain paramount. I urge all schools and families to use these resources to educate, empower and protect our children and young people in the digital world."

The Course was launched during a visit to Branziel Primary School, one of the



Pictured (L-R) Colin Stitt, INEQUE Safeguarding Ltd, Niall Manogue, Principal at Branziel Primary School, Calum McArthur, Teacher and Safer Schools Coordinator, Daphne Wilson, Chair of the Board of Governors, Education Minister Paul Givan and pupils Jacob and Annie.

400 schools already pre-registered to take part in the initiative, which will go live on Safer Internet Day, marked on 10 February 2026.

Niall Manogue, Principal of Branziel Primary School

said: "We're delighted to be commencing the Digital Proficiency Course in our school. We expect that it will help us identify what our children know and don't know about staying safe online and provide a

structured, age-appropriate resource to help them navigate the online world."

To register your school or learn more about the Digital Proficiency Course, visit: <https://saferschoolsni.co.uk/digitalproficiency/>

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Bangor Bingo – A New Chapter Begins

After more than two decades at the heart of the local community, the much-loved Oasis Bingo has officially rebranded as Bangor Bingo.

While the name has changed, the spirit remains the same—great value, friendly faces, and a welcoming night out—now enhanced with a modern bingo experience designed for today's players.

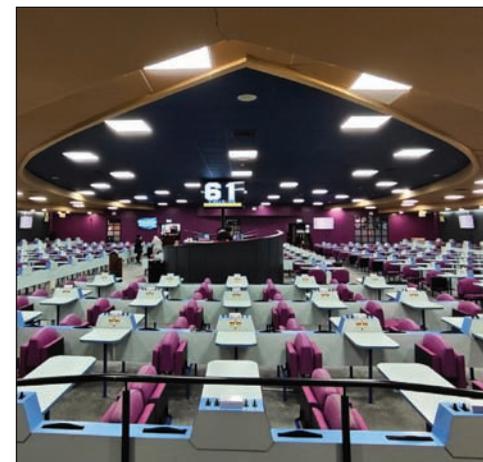
The venue has been refreshed with stylish décor, upgraded technology, and a warm, comfortable atmosphere blending traditional bingo fun with a contemporary feel. Players can enjoy both fully electronic and classic paper bingo, offering

something for every generation, including those discovering bingo for the first time.

New members receive £50 free to use on bingo, gaming machines, or both.

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COUNTDOWN BEGINS TO 2026 BALMORAL SHOW

The Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS) has recently 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 and 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



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.

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 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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Round up of Eventing Ireland Northern Region Fixtures for 2026

The 2026 equestrian calendar is off to a flying start for Eventing Ireland (EI), with the Northern Region leading the charge through its popular winter series and a robust schedule of upcoming national fixtures.

Led by regional chair Georgia Stubington, the Northern Region remains a powerhouse of the sport, blending grassroots development with high-level competition. The year began at The Meadows Equestrian Centre (MEC) in Lurgan with the Baileys Horse Feeds Flexi-Eventing Series, the series serves as the ultimate "springboard" for the main season. This format allows riders to choose individual phases (Dressage, Show Jumping, or Cross-Country) to school their horses. The 2026 league has been bolstered by a £1,000 prize fund from Baileys Horse Feeds, with points awarded for both performance and consistency. Following the

conclusion of the Flexi-Eventing league in February, the Northern Region transitions to its affiliated "One Day Event" (ODE) calendar. The 2026 schedule is scheduled as follows: The Expected Spring/Summer Calendar of events kicks off with the traditional "season opener" on the sandy dunes of Tyrella, Co. Down - 21st March. Tyrella will host 3 fixtures with Hazeldene and Tullymurry also featuring as venues for events. While the Northern Region keeps local riders busy, 2026 also features some major "Home Internationals" and championship events that Northern members frequently target: FEI World Eventing

Championships U25 (Millstreet): Takes place 19th-24th May, 2026, this inaugural event at the Green Glens Arena will bring global talent to Irish shores.

EI National Championships: Scheduled for 20th-23rd August, the 2026 venue will be Lisgarvan House. IPC Eventing Championships: Scheduled for 13th

Scheduled for 13th September, 2026, at Tattersalls, this remains the pinnacle for young Northern Region riders coming through the Pony Club ranks.



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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."

Minister announces plans to tackle welfare fraud and error

Communities Minister Gordon Lyons has launched a new drive to tackle fraud and error in the benefits system.

Speaking in the Assembly, Minister Lyons said: "Fraud is not a victimless crime. As I've said before, when individuals cheat the system they are taking support from those who need it most – family, friends, neighbours and their fellow citizens.

"At this time of significant budget constraint, we must be united in ensuring that public money is directed to our key services – to help families in financial distress, to the homeless, to those who are sick and to educate our young people. Not to criminals."

The latest measures come after the Minister reintroduced the practice of naming those who have been convicted of benefit fraud.

Minister Lyons said: "I have taken away a shield of anonymity from those who steal from all of us and the response from the public to shining a light on these stories has been overwhelmingly positive."

The Minister commissioned a specialist working group within his Department to examine



Communities Minister Gordon Lyons pictured in Parliament Buildings as he announced a new drive to tackle benefit fraud.

the issue. This group has made a number of recommendations designed to enhance prevention of fraud and take swift action when it occurs.

The Minister said that in line with the recommendations of the Report, his Department will:

- Enhance and expand current fraud and error activities.
- Strengthen the specialist training and support for staff to double-down on fraud and error, including

mistakes made by officials.

- Maximise technology solutions in conjunction with DWP and other Departments, at Westminster and locally, to aid investigative efforts.

- Increase the public's understanding of benefit fraud and to share in our zero-tolerance approach.

Minister Lyons warned that some measures are subject to funding bids and said they cannot proceed without the necessary financial support.



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DRIVERS PLAGUED BY CRUMBLING ROADS

Northern Ireland's most pothole-ridden areas have been revealed, with the latest data showing that the region's broken roads continue to pose a danger to motorists.

Potholes are a persistent source of frustration for drivers, leading to costly repair bills for thousands of motorists in Northern Ireland every year. They are also a major safety concern, increasing the risk of serious accidents and injuries on our roads.

With the arrival of National Pothole Day (January 15), the car insurance experts at CompareNI.com have sifted through the latest government data to identify the worst-hit areas in 2025 and find out which local councils made the most progress in carrying out repairs.

While there was a slight drop in the number of potholes reported over the last 12 months – down 3% from the previous calendar year – they continue to present a significant challenge for NI motorists, accounting for 80% of all road claims received by Stormont last year.*

The statistics show that of the 127,109 surface defects recorded on NI roads in 2025, a staggering 77% (97,897) were related to potholes.**

Although around two thirds (67%) of all reported potholes were fixed last year, the repair rate varied wildly between council areas – with Fermanagh



and Omagh tackling 87% of defects compared to 44% in Belfast.

Overall, Belfast emerged as the area with the highest number of reported potholes, with 16,856 in 2025 – a significant rise of 38% from the previous year. Newry, Mourne and Down was the next hardest hit area at 15,249, followed by Mid Ulster, which recorded 12,683 potholes.

While four of the 11 local council areas saw an increase in potholes year-on-year, the majority experienced a decrease. Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon enjoyed the biggest year-on-year drop of 35%, while Lisburn and

Castlereagh recorded the fewest potholes overall at 3980.

Potholes are a consistent bugbear for motorists, with a CompareNI survey finding that 91% of drivers here have issues with potholes in their area, with 96% of respondents saying they weren't being fixed quickly enough.

Decades of chronic under-investment in NI's road maintenance has led to a surge in potholes over recent years and created a massive repair backlog, particularly on rural roads.

While potholes can sometimes be an unavoidable part of driving, there are some preventative measures drivers can take

to help reduce the risk of damage, such as regularly maintaining tyre pressure, being wary of puddles and checking navigation apps for problem areas.

To report potholes, drivers can contact the Department for Infrastructure – they can also seek compensation for damage to help with repair costs. However, they will need proof the damage came from a pothole, so it is important to take photographs and measurements to use as evidence in the claim.

CompareNI.com gives drivers the tools to shop around and find savings on car insurance, as well as niche items such as van and taxi insurance.

GOLF GTI EDITION 50

Exclusive anniversary model offers outstanding driving dynamics and numerous design highlights

In 2026, the Golf GTI2 will celebrate its 50th anniversary, and the brand is marking this special event with this outstanding special model. With an output of 239 kW (325 PS), the Golf GTI EDITION 50 is going down in history as the most powerful production Golf GTI to date.

The Golf GTI is one of the most successful compact sports cars in the world. More than 2.5 million units have been produced worldwide to date.

Volkswagen is equipping the special model with a 2.0-litre turbocharged engine – a modification of the drive unit from the Golf GTI Clubsport4 with 221 kW (300 PS). Thanks to internal engine measures, the Volkswagen engine team have succeeded in increasing the output of the Golf GTI EDITION 50 to 239 kW (325 PS) – compared with the classic Golf GTI2 in the basic configuration with 195 kW (265 PS), this is an additional 44 kW (60 PS). The maximum torque of the EDITION 50 has been increased to 420 Nm. In comparison, the Golf GTI Clubsport has a maximum torque of 400 Nm, while the



Golf GTI produces 370 Nm.

The chassis of the Golf GTI EDITION 50 has been further refined and adapted to the higher power. A MacPherson front axle and a four-link rear axle form the basic layout. Overall, the anniversary model is 15 mm lower than the basic configuration.

The Golf GTI EDITION 50 boasts numerous highlights inside and out. Combined with the red seat belts, the sporty seats with check pattern, a line in Racing Green and synthetic velour elements create a high-quality ambience with a motorsport touch. The newly designed

multifunction leather sports steering wheel features trim with the GTI 50 logo. Together with the integrated shift paddles for the seven-speed DSG, it offers a real motorsport feeling. The seats and steering wheel are thus the interfaces to the exceptional chassis and engine of the Golf GTI EDITION 50.

On the exterior, the GTI 50 logo is placed on the roof spoiler and the insides of the exterior mirrors. Other exclusive features include special trim on the door sills, a roof with black paintwork, black exterior mirror housings and black tailpipe trims on the exhaust system.

A striking side stripe on the side members with a colour gradient from black to Tornado red additionally underlines the sporty character of the vehicle.

Five exterior colours are planned for the Golf GTI Edition 50: in addition to the characteristic Pure white, these are Moonstone grey, Grenadilla black metallic and – exclusively for the anniversary model – Dark Moss green metallic and Tornado red. Tornado red is the colour that has been synonymous with high-performance Volkswagen vehicles over the decades since 1986.

The Kia K4 Has Landed: Modern Driving Starts Here

The all-new Kia K4 has officially arrived in the UK, marking an exciting addition to Kia's lineup.

Combining bold design, advanced technology, everyday practicality, and the latest in safety innovations, the K4 is built for modern drivers seeking style, comfort, and confidence on every journey.

Perfect for commuting, heading out on a family trip, or enjoying the open road, the K4 makes driving smarter and more enjoyable. From the first glance, the Kia K4 impresses with a sleek, sculpted hatchback profile, and commanding road presence. It straddles the line between the C and D-segment, offering the stance of a larger estate car with the agility of a compact.

Signature touches include the Star Map Lighting inspired by the EV9, a floating roofline, hidden rear door handles, and the exclusive Sparkling Yellow paint. The K4's sporty GT-Line adds gloss black mirror caps, side sills, wheel arch mouldings, paddle



shifters, and 17 or 18-inch alloy wheels.

Inside, the cabin blends premium surfaces, ambient lighting, and a driver-focused layout, while the three-spoke GT-Line steering wheel adds a performance-inspired edge.

The Kia K4 offers a spacious, practical interior that's more than just stylish. Rear passengers enjoy class-leading legroom and headroom, while up to 438-litres of boot space ensures plenty of storage for shopping

or luggage. The K4 extends versatility further, offering additional cargo space for families and adventurers alike.

Underneath its bold design, the K4 delivers a smooth, confident driving experience. Drivers can choose from efficient petrol

options or mild-hybrid powertrains that balance performance with economy. For those looking at the sportier end of the line-up, the Kia K4 GT-Line adds an extra dose of excitement, pairing responsive handling with dynamic styling cues.

Whichever version you choose, the K4 delivers refined comfort on longer journeys and composed Safety is always at

the forefront of Kia's design philosophy, and the K4 is no exception. A full suite of Advanced Driver Assistance Systems (ADAS) include Rear Parking Sensors, Lane Keep Assist, and Forward Collision-Avoidance Assist. Higher specs come equipped with more advanced systems such as Blind-Spot View Monitor, Highway Driving Assist 2.0, and Blind-Spot

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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.

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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.

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.

"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."

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



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.

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

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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.

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.

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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.

March into action with task list for home & garden

March is the bridge between winter’s chill and spring’s chaos. It’s the time to realize your lawn isn’t dead—just sleeping—and that your windows are coated in three months of “winter mood.”

This month is all about laying the groundwork so you aren’t overwhelmed when the heat finally hits.

In the garden, your first task is the “great reveal.” Clear away sodden leaves and debris, but stay mindful of hibernating pollinators if the temperature is still dipping.

This is the prime window for pruning roses and late-flowering shrubs to encourage vigorous new growth. Cutting back now ensures the plant’s energy goes into fresh stems rather than maintaining old wood.

Enriching the soil with compost or well-rotted manure now will pay dividends later. If you have a sunny

windowsill, it is officially “go-time” for starting tomatoes, peppers, and sweet peas.

These early starts give you a significant head start before the outside soil is fully workable.

Inside the home, use the seasonal shift as a trigger for safety maintenance. Test your smoke alarms and swap out those dusty HVAC filters that have been struggling through the winter.

It’s also the perfect time to deep-clean your kitchen appliances; running a descaler through your dishwasher now prevents grime from settling in during the busier months ahead.

Finally, take a look at your home’s exterior. Winter storms likely left your

gutters full of stray grit and leaves, which can lead to damp issues during April showers. A quick visual check of the roof for slipped tiles or nesting

birds can save you a fortune in repairs later. A little momentum in March ensures you can actually enjoy the sun when it finally decides to stay.



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