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Level 1 Health and Social Care Students (Skills for Life and Work) from SERC Newtownards Campus had a fantastic opportunity to visit Comber Fire Station recently.

LIGHTS, SIRENS, ACTION! SERC STUDENTS VISIT COMBER FIRE STATION

Level 1 Health and Social Care Students (Skills for Life and Work) from SERC Newtownards Campus had a fantastic opportunity to visit Comber Fire Station recently.

The visit was organised by their tutor Susan Annett Coffey and Acting Deputy Head of School Nikki Rainey, with Ellie Madden from Clanrye Group also in attendance.

Comber Fire Station serves a population of approximately 17,000 residents over a 45 square mile area. It is equipped with one appliance and a drill tower

and is staffed by an on-call team of 6 firefighters.

During the visit, the students enjoyed a behind the scenes tour of the equipment and facilities at the station, had a chance to try on some protective gear and even got to use the fire hoses! The students also met some of the dedicated fire and rescue services employees stationed there.

SERC Tutor, Susan Annett Coffey said: "It was a great opportunity for the students to develop their understanding of the firefighters' roles and their commitment to the safety of local residents. Some of the students are set for placement within a caring environment including nursing and residential homes, so this visit highlighted the importance of

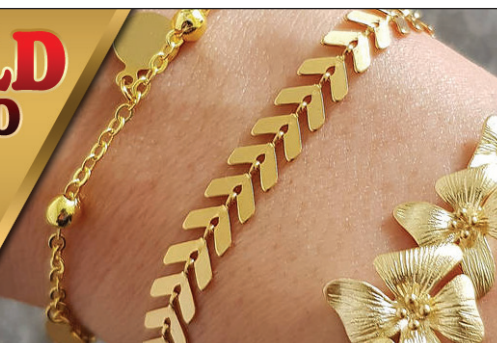
identifying risks and completing fire and health and safety checks regularly to keep residents safe."

Susan continued "Many of the students involved in the visit are hoping to progress to a Level 2 Traineeship next year so this has been an excellent opportunity for them to consolidate their year 1 learning and continue to grow."

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Upgrade to help deliver environmental improvements

NI Water is set to begin a major programme of work in the new year to upgrade the wastewater network in Killinchy County Down.

This major investment will see extensive improvements to Whiterock and Inisharoon Wastewater Pumping Stations (WwPS), along with upgrades to the associated sewer network. Additional stormwater storage will also be built into the system to help reduce flood risk and protect the environmental integrity of Strangford Lough.

Speaking about the project, Sean Milligan, NI Water Senior Project Manager, said:

"The £5m programme of improvements will begin with the installation of a new pumping main between Inisharoon Wastewater Pumping Station and Killinchy Wastewater Treatment Works.

"Pipelining along White-rock Road and Beechvale Road is expected to take

approximately four months. Our contractor, Murphy Dawson WAM, will liaise directly with residents and businesses regarding access as the work progresses.

"The new pumping main will strengthen the wastewater network in the area and provide reliable infrastructure to support upgrades to the local pumping stations which are currently planned for spring/summer 2026.

"When complete in winter 2026, the full programme of work will improve the long-term resilience of the local wastewater system and provide enhanced environmental protection. To accommodate future development in the area, further improvements will be required to modernise Killinchy Wastewater Treatment Works. This work is subject to funding and approvals."

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Students Sleep Out for MACS

Six students from South Eastern Regional College (SERC), along with their tutor, took part in the annual MACS Sleep Out at Banana Block, Belfast on Thursday 4 December, raising a whopping £1,475 to support vital services and raise awareness for the local charity which is working to put youth homelessness to bed.

The BTEC Level 3 National Extended Diploma in Uniformed Protective Services students from SERC's Bangor Campus, along with their lecturer, Irwin Pryce, joined other volunteers to brave the winter weather from 7pm until 7am.

Organised by MACS NI, a local charity, who work with children and young people (aged 16 –25) who haven't had a fair deal – including those facing homelessness, substance abuse, self-harm, mental health issues, leaving care or are at risk - the sleepout, has the aspiration of putting youth homelessness to bed.

Lecturer Irwin Pryce said, "The evening began with a talk from Kate Martin, CEO, MACS NI, about the charity's work, followed by music from the Gathering Drum Circle, and comedy entertainment from talented newcomer Emer Maguire, and Blue Lights star, Dave Elliot. Our breakfast was provided by local favourite, Bodega Bagels

He continued, "Familiar warm beds were replaced by sheets of cardboard as we started the Sleep Out challenge from 11pm. As temperatures plummeted to 3 degrees celsius, the cold, hard concrete and constant



(L to R) - Chloe Knox (Newtownards), Lecturer Irwin Pryce, Diana Eagleson (Bangor) Charlotte Sittlington (Crawfordsburn), Sam Brown (Holywood), Jude Taylor (Newtownards), Finlay Stothers (Portaferry).

noise made for an incredibly uncomfortable sleep. This experience allowed the students to realise the difficulties homeless people in our community must contend with, whilst raising funds for the charity at the front line of supporting them."

Jude Taylor, from Newtownards said, "I slept outside the entrance without shelter, so the cardboard beneath me was soon very soggy. Getting up the next morning was difficult as my body was so cold. The experience really made me

aware of the difficulties homeless people face without a roof over their heads and protection from the elements."

Finlay Stothers, from Portaferry, said, "It was much more difficult than I expected. The noise and the cold made it impossible to sleep.

I'm grateful that we've been able to raise so much money that can help people who are left with no other option than to sleep on our streets."

Irwin Pryce said, "On behalf of the students,

I would like to thank everyone who donated to this cause. We've been overwhelmed by the generosity of our students, staff, family and friends. The money raised will make a real difference in the run up to Christmas in empowering young people - to have a home, strengthen their mental health and be part of a community."

You can support the students for their MACS Sleep Out by donating until the end of the week at: <https://macsni.enthouse.com/pf/serc-ups-d23c1>

BELONGING IN ARDS: LOCAL ARTIST SUPPORTS MAYOR'S CHARITIES

The Mayor of Ards and North Down has unveiled a new artwork created to help celebrate the theme of her Mayoral year: Belonging.

The theme reflects a commitment to nurturing a Borough where every resident is valued equally, where people feel proud of their local identity, and where everyone shares a responsibility to care for our landscape, our towns and villages, and - most importantly - one another.

This year's Mayor's charities - St Vincent de Paul, North Down and Ards Women's Aid, and Orchardville - reflect and complement that theme.

Donaghadee artist Deborah Robinson has lovingly created a special image to celebrate Belonging, and has generously gifted its use for fundraising. As part of these efforts, beautiful Sea Salt & Driftwood hand-poured candles by local Bangor-based Bespoke Candles



The Mayor of Ards and North Down, Councillor Gillian McCollum with Pat & Caoimhe Duggan, Bespoke Candles and Artist, Deborah Robinson.

feature the illustration.

A beautiful blend of local talent, creativity, and community spirit.

Speaking about the collaboration, Mayor of Ards and North Down, Gillian McCollum said:

"I am incredibly grateful to Deborah Robinson for creating

such a thoughtful and meaningful piece of art that captures the essence of Belonging in our Borough. I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the great team at Bespoke Candles, who have so generously supported and engaged with us to

make this possible."

Proceeds from sales of the limited-edition candles will go towards the Mayor's charities, and are available for purchase in North Down Museum, Ards Arts Centre and from the Mayor's Office, City Hall, Bangor.



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Community Spirit Shines in “Peggy, Francis and Me” Theatre Tour

The Rural Engagement Arts Programme recently presented “Peggy, Francis and Me”, a nostalgic and heartwarming theatre production inspired by authentic memories shared by residents from across the Ards Peninsula.

Led by Peninsula Healthy Living Partnership, in collaboration with Cr8 Theatre and Age Friendly Ards and North Down, the play was shaped by contributions from over 70 community members. Their stories were sensitively crafted into a script by Sarah Lyle and brought to life by a talented cast of local performers.

Supported by Arts Council NI, Ards and North Down Borough Council, and the SEHSCT Ards Peninsula Multi-Disciplinary Team, the production ran in the Autumn with eight free performances, six open to the public and two delivered in care homes.

Performances took place in a range of welcoming venues including The Portico of Ards Arts and Heritage Centre, Kircubbin Community & Health Centre, Ballywalter Village Hall, Carrowdore Church Hall, Ards Arts Centre, Rubane Farm, and Barrhall and Scrabo Care Homes. These familiar settings helped audiences connect deeply with the themes of memory, place, and belonging.

Audience feedback for



the performances was overwhelmingly positive, with 100% rating the events as excellent. The project strengthened community connections, celebrated local heritage, and brought joy to audiences, particularly care home residents, who found the reminiscence themes especially meaningful.

Speaking about the initiative, Amy McKelvey, Community Arts Development Officer with Ards and North Down Borough Council said: “This fantastic project was developed by Cr8 Theatre and delivered in partnership with Peninsula Healthy Living. Working with older people’s groups

from the Ards Peninsula it is a wonderful example of the power of performance to engage with communities, tell their story and to cherish their memories. Such a meaningful production, both humorous and powerful, sentimental and heartwarming - huge congratulations to all involved.”

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CALL FOR INCREASED RESOURCES FOR COMMUNITY SAFETY TEAM

Mayor Gillian McCollum and Councillor Pete Wray have brought a Motion to Ards and North Down Borough Council calling for increased resources into the Council's Community Safety Team.

Mayor McCollum told this month's Active and Healthy Communities Committee:

"Safety is a cornerstone of our work here on Council. It is not just a priority—it is a responsibility. It is the basis of trust between our communities and local government. When residents feel safe, they thrive. And they deserve to feel secure, but right now, that safety is increasingly under strain.

"Currently, community safety in our borough is delivered by a dedicated but very small Community Safety Team with support from PCSP, PSNI and our Good Relations Team. In the past year alone, anti-social behaviour incidents rose by 2.6%, with 3,159 cases reported. Hate crime offences increased by 79%, and hate-motivated incidents rose by 34%. Despite these obvious challenges, the bulk of this work is undertaken by just two officers.

"During periods of increased anti-social behaviour, such as school holidays or summer months, our resources are stretched to breaking point. For seasonal hotspots like summertime in Ballyholme and in my own DEA, Helens Bay and Seapark, or Bangor City Centre, Blair Mayne, Portavogie, and Portaferry in winter, these areas demand concentrated attention, which of course leaves many other areas completely unpatrolled

during these times.

"To deliver the level of service our residents expect, and deserve, we need additional staffing and resources. And that investment is not just about patrols—it's about prevention, visibility, and community trust. More resources mean more patrols, better coverage, and stronger partnerships. It means we can deliver education programs without sacrificing patrols. It means we can respond to complaints promptly and maintain a visible presence that deters crime.

"I urge members to commit to increasing our precious community safety resources. Let us give our Community Safety Team the capacity it needs to protect every corner of our borough, to make our communities safer, stronger, and more resilient."

Ulster Unionist Party Councillor Pete Wray seconded the cross-party motion.

"I am delighted to work together with Mayor McCollum around this issue that I feel very passionately about. All responsibility for community safety shouldn't sit with the PSNI alone. Council has a duty to work in partnership with statutory agencies, voluntary groups, and the whole community to ensure that people feel safe living in the borough.

"The Council Community Safety Team is comprised of two members of staff. These officers do an incredible job, and I've plenty of experience working together with them. The truth is that we chronically under-resource this department in Ards and North Down. Belfast City Council employs 16 officers, Antrim and Newtownabbey have 4, while Derry City and Strabane employ 11. There's many issues with our model of only two staff, such as the fact that a minimum of two is required to go out on street patrols. Therefore if one is on leave or off sick,



the patrol can't take place.

"It's well documented that our borough has experienced challenges with ASB. Over recent years our beaches have been a particular hot spot. We scramble around and call emergency meetings, but in the end the PSNI have to bring in extra officers and extract officers from normal duties to cover this. The PSNI has its own financial and resourcing issues, and I believe we should be doing much more to help.

"The youth work and detached outreach approach

to tackling anti-social behaviour has undeniable benefits. If staff build positive relationships with young people then the chances of them getting involved in ASB is greatly reduced. The education and prevention approach is much more efficient.

"I encourage fellow Councillors to support this and to take the first step of increasing the numbers for our community safety team. Nothing can be more important than the safety of our citizens, and I want us to prioritise this."

Upgrade for Pitches at Millisle in progress

North Down DUP MLA Stephen Dunne has welcomed progress on major upgrade works at the Millisle Council Football pitches on the Abbey Road.

Speaking after receiving an update from Council officials and visiting the pitches, Mr Dunne said:

"I am pleased to see solid progress on the long-overdue upgrade of the Millisle pitches. Local clubs have been dealing with persistent drainage problems and uneven surfaces and for many years,

and these works are crucial for giving players a safe and dependable place to train and enjoy competitive football. The Council has confirmed that the first stage is now complete, with further works to be carried out once weather and ground conditions improve.

Unfortunately, the heavy rainfall in the autumn has



delayed works slightly, however I have received assurances from Council that the project remains on track for completion ahead of the 2026/27 season. I will continue to engage with Council officers to ensure this project is completed as quickly as possible. Clubs like Abbey Villa FC have been playing football on these pitches for many years, and have a large youth setup

with hundred of children and young people needing more pitches and better facilities. Local teams like Abbey Villa and Millisle FC who use these pitches regularly, deserve investment in improving local sporting facilities, and this upgrade is an important and timely step forward.

Alderman Robert Adair added:

"I'm very encouraged to see real progress being made on the Millisle pitches upgrade, a project that has been needed for quite some time and that I have pushed for progress through Council. Quality sports facilities are essential for supporting our young people, our local clubs, and the wider community and something I have been passionate about for many years.

This investment is a strong start, but we must continue to build on it. I will keep working with Council and partners to secure further improvements across the Borough so that every area has the standard of facilities it deserves. Supporting grassroots sport remains a key priority, and I'm committed to ensuring that momentum continues."

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Time to let the light in...

Dementia NI members drive development of Sensory Garden

A new sensory garden opened at Ward Park in Bangor earlier this year after a lengthy consultation process with charities, community groups, individuals and their families, as to how it could appeal to, and be used by, as many groups of people as possible.

In late 2024, Ards and North Down Borough Council approached Dementia NI members in Bangor to provide feedback and guidance as to how its planned dementia-friendly garden should be designed. Council representatives and the garden designers visited the organisation's Bangor group and discussed possible layouts, materials, seating styles and more, with samples to review and the opportunity for input and feedback.

The Dementia NI members, all of whom are living with a diagnosis of dementia, provided vital intel to the process, heavily influencing the design of the garden and resulting in a well-rounded and holistic space providing a treat for all the senses in a safe and enclosed garden environment.

Whether from the pathway, which Dementia NI members stipulated should be a consistent size, shape and colour and on a loop, to the comfortable and well-spaced-out seating throughout the garden, the feedback and first-hand experiences were invaluable to the designers and the Council as the designs took shape.

The members of



Dementia NI member Raymond Crawford, and his wife Elsie, chatted with BBC Radio Ulster's David Maxwell about gardening and the importance of getting outdoors, at the new sensory garden in Ward Park, Bangor. They were joined by Jonny Bettes (far left), Parks Development Manager with Ards and North Down Borough Council.

Dementia NI suggested the planting should have attributes that will be evident throughout the year, whether shape, size, texture or scent, to allow for any visitors who may be neurodivergent, hard of hearing, partially sighted or other issues to appreciate and benefit from the carefully considered trees, shrubs and plants.

The introduction of a water feature was also a popular suggestion among Dementia NI members, allowing for a calming

element with the flow of water, it also provides a fun place for children – of all ages – to play on sunnier days.

Rodney James, a member of Dementia NI from Comber, and part of the joint Bangor-Newtownards group, officially cut the ribbon and opened the garden at a special event in August, while Raymond Crawford, another Dementia NI member, from Millisle, was interviewed by BBC Radio Ulster's Gardeners' Corner in October about the organisation's involvement in the consultation process.

Dementia NI is a local charity working to drive positive change for those living with a diagnosis of dementia throughout Northern Ireland. The charity operates 16 Empowerment Groups across all the Health Trust areas, providing vital peer support, information and signposting for its members.

For more information on its life changing work, visit www.dementiani.org

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February 10th & 24th

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SAM HIGHLIGHTS VITAL ROLE OF VOLUNTEERS IN THE HEALTH SERVICE

The South Eastern Trust recently celebrated International Volunteer Day by recognising the invaluable contribution Volunteers make every day across hospital and community services.

One of those dedicated Volunteers is Sam McFerran, who previously worked in the Trust as a Technician. After retiring, Sam felt he wanted to “give something back” and returned to the organisation, this time as a Meeter and Greeter in the Outpatients Department in Ards Hospital.

Sam’s role as a Meeter and Greeter involves him helping to check in patients for their appointments using an online system, helping them to locate the clinic they need to attend and providing that listening ear to those that need it most.

Reflecting on his decision to Volunteer, Sam said, “When I became a Volunteer, I did not know much about the role of a Meeter and Greeter or

what it involved. When I started out, the support I received was amazing. I was shadowed for a few days and learned so much from that experience. Since then, I have developed my own skills as I have progressed in the role.”

Sam shared how rewarding he finds supporting patients arriving for appointments, “Coming to hospital can be a stressful experience for most people and it is so good for me to help put them at ease. It feels good in your heart to know you have given someone comfort, even just a smile, to help ease what lies ahead for them.

“I love meeting people and making new friends. I have always had that desire to serve others. The



staff in the Outpatients Department are wonderful to work alongside. I am here three days a week and they make it such an enjoyable experience, I feel like part of the team.”

South Eastern Trust, Volunteer Services Manager, Sonya Duffy, emphasised the importance of the Meeter and Greeter role, “Having someone welcoming patients into the Outpatients Department makes such a difference and helps put people at ease. Sam’s role also enables staff to focus on their clinical duties while he provides support across the Department.

“Volunteers play a crucial role across the Trust, supporting not just patients but staff as well. Many of our Volunteers tell us they have made

new friends and that Volunteering prevents them from becoming socially isolated after retirement. It brings joy and purpose to their lives. We also have many young Volunteers who gain invaluable experience that helps them onto the employment ladder.”

Encouraging others to consider Volunteering, Sam shared, “Come forward and find out what it is like to Volunteer. You will fit into any of the roles, there are opportunities not just in hospital settings, but in the community as well. Give it a go!”

If you are interested in Volunteering, contact the Team at volunteer@setrust.hscni.net or call (028) 9056 4817 to find out more.

New partnership to tackle work-related ill health

Ards and North Down Borough Council is partnering with the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI) to support a targeted campaign dedicated to helping safeguard the health of local workers.

Mayor, Councillor Gillian McCollum joined HSENI Chief Executive Robert Kidd to publicise HSENI’s year-long Workplace Health Campaign which addresses occupational diseases such as cancers, chronic lung conditions, musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) and work-related mental wellbeing.

It urges everyone to become aware of occupational diseases that can arise out of workplace activities if hazards are not properly controlled. It also challenges all involved to find out if they have the information they need to remove the risk or reduce it to an acceptable level.

During a meeting with the Mayor, HSENI described how work-related ill health is estimated as having a societal cost to Northern Ireland of over £390m each year, with average figures indicating that there could be over 300 deaths per year and thousands more suffering health problems due to work-related illnesses.

Robert Kidd, Chief Executive of HSENI, said no one’s job was worth losing their life or health over.

“These figures tell a stark story about the impact work-related ill health is having on our society, our workforce and our health service. We need to take urgent action now to ensure every workplace is one



where the health risks are properly managed” he said.

“No one should lose their life or develop ill health simply as a result of the job they do. Yet, it is estimated that over 300 people die each year due to work-related disease and thousands more left living with serious and debilitating health conditions, with an estimated cost of over £390million per year to society. But these aren’t just statistics, they represent real people and real loss.

“So, we are delighted that Ards and North Down Borough Council and Mayor Councillor Gillian McCollum are joining with us to help address this problem by supporting our Workplace Health Campaign, promoting our key messages and encouraging employers to take practical steps to protect workers’ health. Everyone deserves to return home with their health protected as well as their safety. With the council’s support, we can reach even more employers, share practical guidance and support healthier, more productive workplaces,” Robert added.

The Mayor said:

“As Mayor of Ards and North Down Borough Council one of my primary concerns is the health and wellbeing of our people and this work with HSENI provides us with an excellent opportunity to bring tangible improvements to the health of our workforces. I would urge everyone to get involved and help us to raise the health standards across all local workplaces by taking action now to protect their staff from workplace illnesses, which in turn will help support the local economy and health service.”

Key findings from HSENI’s ‘Workplace Health Statistics and Analysis for Northern Ireland 2025’ publication:

- Occupational Lung Disease
- 110 deaths estimated from Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) due to work in 2023
- 6,400 people estimated to have suffered from work-related COPD in 2023
- 15 Asbestosis-related deaths registered in 2022
- Occupational Cancer
- Average per year figures indicate: Around 200 deaths could be attributable to occupational cancers

• 47 deaths from Mesothelioma with the same number of deaths (47) estimated from Asbestos-related lung cancers

• 20 lung cancer deaths estimated due to exposure to Silica dust at work

• 80 other work-related cancer deaths estimated, such as bladder, lung, and other cancers, due to exposure to cancer-causing agents, for example, diesel engine exhaust emissions (15), mineral oils (15), and other (50).

Other work-related illnesses (caused or made worse by work in 2023-24):

Estimated number of cases:

- 18,000 people suffered from musculoskeletal disorder (MSD)
- 15,000 people suffered from stress, depression, or anxiety
- 4,000 people suffered from illnesses other than stress, depression, or anxiety such as skin conditions and hearing loss
- Days lost
- 6 4 0 , 0 0 0 days lost estimated in 2023/24 due to work-related illnesses.

For campaign information and resources visit Workplace Health | Health and Safety Executive

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Melanie Grimsley shares her powerful story

Local young people were moved and inspired after meeting Melanie Grimsley, the subject of the award-winning portrait that recently claimed the Taylor Wessing Photo Portrait Prize 2025.



The lunch, hosted by Ards and North Down Mayor, Councillor Gillian McCollum, offered an intimate setting for Melanie to share her powerful story of resilience and self-acceptance.

Melanie, a burn survivor whose striking image captured national attention, spoke candidly about her journey of overcoming adversity and embracing confidence. Her openness sparked meaningful conversations among attendees, who described

the experience as “deeply moving” and “a reminder of the strength within us all.”

The event aimed to empower young people by showing that beauty and courage come in many forms. Participants asked engaging questions, gaining insights into Melanie’s personal challenges and triumphs, and left with renewed motivation to face their own obstacles.

Speaking of the event, Melanie said, “I’m

delighted to have met such engaging young people, whose openness and honest questions encourage me, and inspire me to keep doing the work I do. I’m honoured to have been hosted by the mayor and to have been part of such a meaningful and warm conversation.”

The Mayor of Ards and North Down, Councillor Gillian McCollum, said: “We are indebted to Melanie for sharing her time so generously. I have known Mel for many years

and watched her inspiring story unfold. It’s a story that resonates deeply - it isn’t just about her portrait, it’s about hope, resilience and the power of sharing our truths.”

The Taylor Wessing Photo Portrait Prize is one of the most prestigious photography awards in the world, celebrating outstanding portraiture. Melanie’s image, praised for its honesty and emotional depth, has become a symbol of strength and authenticity.

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Local practice invites new patients to experience private dental care with a personal touch. Helens Bay Dental, a private clinic with over three decades of trusted service to families across the community, is setting new standards in patient care by embracing the very latest in digital dentistry.

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imaging, the team can deliver faster, more accurate, and more comfortable treatments—ranging from routine care to dental implants and cosmetic solutions.

“Digital dentistry has transformed the way we care for patients,” explained a spokesperson for the clinic. “It means less waiting, no messy impressions, and treatment that is precisely tailored to each individual. But just as important is the personal experience—we never lose sight of the human touch.”

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options, and feel completely at ease before beginning treatment. With a loyal, long-

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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.

Emalyn Turkington, CEO, finds that January always brings a surge in women and their families coming forward for help after spending Christmas with their abusive partners. The new year often brings an increase in abuse due to family confinement, higher alcohol consumption and money worries.

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.

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.

NDAWA have a service called the One Stop Shop (OSS) which offers free, immediate and confidential service for women who have been affected by domestic

abuse. Women will have access to legal support, benefits advice, housing support and safety advice.

The OSS meets every 2nd and 4th Tuesday of the Month in House Church, Newtownards, 10am - 12pm.

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

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TAKING A GANDER AT OUR WINTER VISITORS: GEESE

The best time to see and hear wild geese in Ireland, north and south, is winter.

In autumn many species migrate south from Canada, Iceland and other northern countries to find food and shelter during the cold dark days, and there's something about their wild calls and easy, purposeful flight, often in V formation, which tugs at our hearts, evocative of unrestricted freedom. Indeed, historically, people have venerated wild geese, and for instance, the term was applied to the Irish Jacobite soldiers who left Ireland in 1691 following their defeat in the Williamite War, an event commemorated as the 'Flight of the Wild Geese'.

My favourite native geese are the light-bellied brents which visit Strangford Lough and our east coasts in thousands every year, but there's another goose with an interesting mixed heritage. Greylag geese are large...up to 3 foot in length...and it's their size which attracted humans to regard them as food, not just by killing them, but domesticating them, as we did with cows, sheep and all the rest, and they became what we might call the farmyard goose. Yet unlike those other domesticated animals, and despite all the subsequent goose-



for-food breeding programmes over centuries, greylags still exist as a species. They still migrate south for winter from Iceland, but others stay here year-round, mating and breeding, mainly the offspring and descendants of escaped

domesticated geese, what the scientists call 'feral', a word mainly used to describe domesticated animals... cats, dogs, etc...which have returned to the wild. On a clear cold winter day, when we hear the haunting honking of

geese it's hard not to stop what we're doing, to look up and admire these magical wild birds as they fly past. Perhaps part of their attraction is that they always seem to know where they're going... JVA

Strathearn School named top school in Northern Ireland

Strathearn School – a girls' grammar school based on Belfast's Belmont Road – is this year ranked first of all grammar schools in Northern Ireland, and 31 in the top 150 state secondary schools across the UK, according to the 33rd edition of The Sunday Times Parent Power Guide 2026.

The rankings are based on 2025 examination results, when pupils at Strathearn School recorded 83% grades A*-B at A-level. The same year, 79% of all GCSE grades achieved by Strathearn pupils were A* or A – the highest year on record for the School. Strathearn emphasises a caring, supportive environment where "each individual is valued." The school aims not only for academic success, but also for the personal growth of pupils: fostering confidence, self-esteem, a love of learning, and a sense of belonging.

Strathearn School Principal Nicola Connery commented: "Having consistently ranked in the top cohort of grammar schools in this prestigious report, we are thrilled to rank in first place this year – particularly given the exceptionally high quality of grammar schools listed across Northern Ireland. "This is testament to the outstanding hard work, talent and determination of our pupils, the support and encouragement of their families at home, and the inspirational dedication of our superb team of teaching and non-

teaching staff." Whilst the rankings focus on examination results, Mrs Connery said that Strathearn's success "transcends all aspects of school life". "Our ethos as a school centres on providing a caring and nurturing environment in which every pupil is celebrated for their own individual talents and is encouraged to realise their full potential across a wide range of both curricular and extra-curricular areas." Paying tribute to the staff at the School, Rosemary Bailie, Chair of the Board of Governors at Strathearn,



commented: "Led by Mrs Connery and the staff of Strathearn School work exceptionally hard throughout the school year to encourage and empower our pupils to excel in all that they do, and this reflects in these latest rankings."

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thoughtfully designed rooms and friendly service, makes this a winter stay to savour. So whether you're planning a quiet couple's getaway, a mid-season recharge, or a chance to explore one of Northern Ireland's most iconic landmarks, the Winter Warmer offers a little bit of everything. To book, call us on 028 2073 1210 or visit our website at www.thecausewayhotel.com Let the coast call you back this winter.

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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. 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>

Nextgen Properties: Your local Property Partner this New Year

Nextgen Properties is a trusted estate agency dedicated to serving the vibrant property market in Donaghadee, Bangor and the entire Ards Peninsula.

The company prides itself on being a truly comprehensive firm, handling virtually every aspect of the property lifecycle for both private individuals and commercial entities.

The primary benefit of choosing Nextgen Properties lies in their extensive scope of expertise. They operate far beyond traditional residential sales and lettings, offering

specialised services that cover commercial sales and lettings, building sites, and small holdings. Their portfolio also includes crucial support services like property management, handling complex rating appeals, and providing expert advice on compensation matters. This broad, full-service approach ensures clients only need one point of contact for diverse property requirements.

At the core of the

company’s operation is a commitment to professional, high-quality service. Nextgen Properties’ stated mission is to provide a personal and efficient experience to both clients and purchasers alike. This dedication to client-focused service, combined with their extensive knowledge of the local Northern Irish market, positions them as a forward-thinking and reliable partner.

Whether you are a first-time buyer, an experienced investor, or a commercial landlord, Nextgen Properties offers the professional guidance necessary to navigate the local property landscape successfully.

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WAYS TO GET AHEAD
IN 2026

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To truly achieve your best life in 2026, the key is to make a fundamental shift from endless consumption to mindful curation, starting with your digital habits.

Don't simply block out time; instead, schedule short, intentional digital minutes for specific tasks. Outside of these focused windows, you must aggressively limit digital noise and notifications. Crucially, establish phone-free zones—such as the dining table, bedroom, and the first hour of the day—to protect your mental space and foster deeper relationships. This ensures that technology remains a servant to your goals, rather than the reverse.

Next, aim for Minimalist Momentum by systematically decluttering your environment and routine. A simpler environment leads to less decision fatigue.

Implement the “tidy-up trio”—a commitment to remove three non-essential items daily. Simultaneously, reclaim the luxury of a less busy schedule by ruthlessly pruning non-essential social and professional commitments. For financial simplicity, automate all routine tasks, transforming passive spending into active saving.

Build a robust Buffer Zone to handle the inevitable unpredictability of life. Financial security is the bedrock of mental calm; therefore, create a 30-day accessible savings fund that acts as a true stress reducer.

Apply this same principle to your time:



add a 15-minute time buffer to all appointments, eliminating the corrosive stress of rushing. This proactive resilience is further supported by establishing an Emotional Buffer with dedicated, non-negotiable weekly time for restorative rest, not just “zoning out.”

Finally, prioritize Macro-Health through

consistent, enjoyable micro-habits—forget extreme changes. Commit to the “5-minute movement rule” daily, whether it’s stretching or a quick walk. Make hydration automatic by drinking water immediately upon waking, and maintain a consistent sleep wind-down routine to prime

your body for rest. Couple this physical foundation with a dynamic Growth Mindset that actively schedules “skill-play” time for fun. View every setback not as a failure, but as valuable, actionable feedback, ensuring you remain curious, adaptable, and fully engaged with the opportunities 2026 will bring.

Opened in Autumn 2025 - The Phat Fryer, located on the Gransha Road is a sister business to ‘The Chip Stop’ which has been trading on the Belfast Road for over 8 years.

‘The Phat Fryer’s’ food celebrates the classics: perfectly battered cod alongside generous portions of freshly cut chips. The Phat Fryer knows its audience and expands its offerings to include regional favourites.

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in Bangor and in search of the ultimate comfort food experience, follow the locals to The Chip Stop on the Belfast Road or The

Phat Fryer, on the Gransha Road you’ll quickly understand why this Bangor institution continues to reel in the crowds!

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Russell & Co Solicitors Announces New Leadership Team

Russell & Co Solicitors are pleased to announce the appointment of four new directors as the firm moves into an exciting new phase of its development. The leadership team now comprises Simon Chambers, Matthew Morrison, Sarah Newell and Sharon Ramsey, four senior solicitors with a wealth of experience in general practice.

Speaking on behalf of the new directors, Simon Chambers said "We are delighted to take the firm forward and build on its long-established foundations. Our focus is on strengthening our services, investing in our people, and ensuring that clients continue

probate, family law, conveyancing, commercial and criminal law and private client work, reflecting the firm's continued commitment to accessible, high-quality legal services across Northern Ireland and clients can expect complete continuity of service across all existing practice areas.

to receive the practical, dependable advice they expect from Russell & Co. Sharon Ramsey added "This is an important moment for the firm. We are committed to developing a

progressive practice while maintaining the strong client relationships that have always defined Russell & Co." Matthew Morrison commented: "We're looking forward to driving



Simon Chambers, Matthew Morrison, Sarah Newell and Sharon Ramsey.

the next stage of the firm's growth. Our aim is to combine tradition with innovation, ensuring the firm evolves in line with the needs of the community we serve," while Sarah Newell explained: "Client care sits

at the heart of everything we do. This transition allows us to build even further on that ethos, delivering legal services that are personal, responsive, and effective." In line with its commitment to

nurturing the next generation of lawyers in Northern Ireland, Russell & Co has taken on two promising young trainee solicitors, Alistair Norton and Erin Stewart, who will gain comprehensive Solicitors training in all areas of law as they complete the vocational stage of their qualifying.

The firm also welcomed solicitor Jennifer Gorman earlier this year, bringing a additional expertise in employment, matrimonial matters, personal injury, and civil litigation. She joins solicitor Brian Leeson who spent more than twenty-

five years in practice on his own account, providing a full range of legal services, and a dedicated staff of paralegal and support personnel. The transition marks an energising new chapter for Russell & Co as it continues to support the legal needs of individuals, families, and businesses throughout the region.

For confidential advice or to arrange a consultation with one of our solicitors, contact Russell & Co on 028 9181 4444, where the team is ready to assist with clear, practical legal support.

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BLOOMING BRILLIANT

When the decs come down turn to fresh flowers to revitalise your home!

As the festive sparkle of Christmas decorations begins to fade, many homes feel a little bare. But fear not, for the winter months offer a beautiful opportunity to refresh your decor with a stunning array of fresh blooms. While it's true that cut flowers generally last longer in cooler temperatures, making winter an ideal time for floral displays, the right choice of resilient flowers can ensure your home remains vibrant well into the new year.

One of the most cheerful and enduring choices for post-Christmas decor is the Tulip. Available in a vast spectrum of colours, from crisp whites to bold reds and sunny yellows, tulips bring a fresh, spring-like

feel to any room. Their unique characteristic of continuing to grow and gracefully bend towards light adds a dynamic, living element to your arrangements. Pair them with a simple glass vase for an elegant, modern look.

If you're looking for something with a striking presence, Oriental Lilies are an excellent choice. While their scent can be potent, their large, exquisite blooms and long-lasting nature make them perfect for a prominent display. Choose varieties like 'Stargazer' or 'Casa Blanca' for their dramatic beauty. Be sure to remove the pollen stamens to prevent staining and prolong their freshness.

Finally, don't overlook Chrysanthemums.



Especially the 'Cremon' or 'Santini' varieties, these resilient blooms are winter superstars. They come in an incredible range of shapes, sizes, and colors, from dense pom-poms to delicate

daisies. They are incredibly versatile, fitting seamlessly into both traditional and contemporary settings, and will easily outlast many other cut flowers, keeping your home looking lovely

long after the last of the tinsel is packed away. Embrace the beauty of these hardy blooms to banish the post-holiday blues and infuse your home with natural elegance.



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Resolutions Worth Keeping All Year

We enthusiastically sign up for gym memberships, vow to learn a new language, and promise to finally declutter the garage.

But for too many of us, the momentum fades by mid-February, leaving behind a trail of guilt and unused

intentions. The secret to success isn't about setting grand, unrealistic goals; it's about adopting sustainable habits and making small, consistent shifts that compound over time. This year, instead of making a list of things you might fail at, focus on these resolutions that are genuinely worth keeping for all twelve months and beyond.

Mind and Body

True long-term success stems from a foundation of good health—both mental and physical.

The first essential resolution is to Move Daily (Not Just Exercise Hard). The flawed resolution is often, "I

will work out for 90 minutes, five times a week," which often leads to burnout. The sustainable commitment, however, is, "I will find ways to move my body for at least 20 minutes every day." Instead of fixating on grueling, intense workouts, aim for daily movement. This could be a brisk walk during your lunch break, a stretching session while watching TV, or dancing while you cook dinner. Consistency in movement is far more valuable than sporadic intensity.

Finance and Future
Financial peace isn't achieved through one-off windfalls, but through

disciplined, repetitive actions.

A crucial financial resolution is to Automate Savings. Relying on willpower to manually save £500 every month is the flawed approach. The sustainable resolution is, "I will set up an automatic transfer of 5% of my paycheck to a savings account." Make your savings non-negotiable and invisible. By automating a small, manageable percentage of your income to a separate account right after payday, you remove the decision-making process entirely. You save money without even thinking about it, guaranteeing financial

progress throughout the year.

Growth and Relationships

These resolutions focus on enriching your life outside of work and the gym.

Resolve to Learn One New Small Skill Per Quarter. The flawed resolution is overwhelming: "I will become fluent in Mandarin this year." The more manageable and sustainable resolution is, "I will dedicate 15 minutes a day to a small, new skill (e.g., learning a new knot, practicing a basic piano chord, mastering a complex Excel formula) for three months." Focusing on one major life goal can be overwhelming. Instead, break down 'learning' into achievable, bite-sized chunks. By the end of the year, you will have four new skills and a continuous habit of growth.

The most powerful resolutions are not outcomes (like "lose 20 pounds"), but systems—the daily actions and habits that get you there. This year, ditch the all-or-nothing mindset. Start small, be consistent, and trust that a tiny, positive shift maintained daily will deliver monumental results by the time December rolls around again.

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Ireland's Hidden Heartlands regional brand to be used in Fermanagh

Economy Minister Dr Caoimhe Archibald has announced a new licensing agreement which will see the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand used in County Fermanagh for the first time.

Ireland's Hidden Heartlands is a regional marketing and experience brand that was developed by Fáilte Ireland which promotes Ireland's central heartlands, focussing on its natural assets and waterways, across the island and internationally.

The licensing agreement between Tourism NI and Fáilte Ireland will enable eligible tourism businesses in Fermanagh to use the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand and be featured in Tourism NI marketing campaigns.

The move is one of the Minister's priorities within the Tourism Vision and Action Plan, which aims to incorporate the north into Fáilte Ireland's regional experience brands.

The licensing agreement has been put in place to build on the strong cross-border collaboration which already exists between tourism businesses and public

bodies in Co Fermanagh and their Ireland's Hidden Heartlands counterparts.

Laura McCorry, Chief Executive of Tourism Northern Ireland, said: "Being part of the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand gives local tourism businesses a powerful promotional platform on the global stage."

"Promoting the region as an interconnected tourism experience will help attract more visitors to the area and boost the local economic benefits of tourism."

"The inclusion of Co Fermanagh, with its serene lakes, ancient landscapes, deep sense of tranquillity and welcoming communities, will enrich the overall brand, offering visitor experiences which are authentic and profoundly memorable."

Caroline Bocquel, CEO of Fáilte Ireland, said: "This agreement creates new opportunities for tourism businesses across Ireland's



Hidden Heartlands in both jurisdictions.

"By building on a strong brand identity and encouraging collaboration, it will help businesses enhance their visibility, attract more visitors and offer a more joined-up experience for those exploring the area."

Alice Mansergh, Chief Executive of Tourism Ireland, said: "At Tourism Ireland, we are proud to promote the island of Ireland overseas as a destination of choice for visitors."

"From the River Shannon to Lough Erne, intercon-

necting waterways and surrounding countryside provide wonderful, authentic opportunities to experience nature, greenery, communities and culture."

"We'll be promoting the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand as part of our overseas marketing programmes, in partnership with industry and agencies on the ground. Ultimately, helping overseas visitors first choose the island and then explore across geographies supports broad benefits for businesses and communities."

Thompson Leisure 2026 Motorhome and Campervan Show

EVERY SATURDAY IN JANUARY 2026

Thompson Leisure Ltd (TLL) is Ireland's largest Motorhome and Campervan dealership, representing 10 leading brands with over 250 vehicles available to choose from on our sales site in Dromore Co Down.

A family-owned business with more than 45 years of experience, TLL have built an enviable reputation all over Ireland for quality, choice, and expert guidance—helping thousands of customers find the perfect vehicle to suit their lifestyle and budget.

We are delighted to invite you to the:

Thompson Leisure 2026 Motorhome Launch Event at our Dromore Sales Office.

The event will feature a spectacular 15,000 Sq Ft heated marquee measuring an impressive 65m x 20m metres, purpose-built to house a wide selection of our 2026 motorhomes indoors. Customers can stroll freely through the space, step inside vehicles, compare layouts, explore at their

own pace in a relaxed, comfortable environment while enjoying a coffee and a chat with our experienced staff.

Each Saturday in January you can enjoy a delicious Burger or Hotdog, Teas, Coffee, background music, and a welcoming atmosphere while discovering everything our manufacturers have to offer for 2026.

Attendance is open to everyone, but we kindly ask Saturday visitors to book a complimentary day ticket to assist with catering arrangements.

To celebrate the arrival of 2026 models from all our manufacturers, we're offering an exceptional 7.9% APR across our entire range of new and used motorhomes and campervans.

For those travelling from further afield, we are also offering a special weekend stay at our aftersales site, which is situated on the stunning Georgian, Drumnabreeze Estate, Magheralin for a nominal fee of £10 per vehicle, with all proceeds



donated to our chosen charity partner, the Air Ambulance. The estate provides facilities to ensure a comfortable stay—perfect whether you're making a weekend of it or simply fancy a short getaway.

Guests staying on-site can enjoy exclusive access to the Drumnabreeze Estate's beautiful woodland walks, 10 acres of gardens, and the enchanting Georgian walled garden.

Transport will be provided to and from our Dromore sales yard which is 10 min-

utes away, where you can explore Ireland's largest selection of new and used motorhomes and campervans, all available with outstanding launch offers. Complimentary tea and coffee will be available while you browse.

Well-behaved dogs are very welcome for both day visits and weekend stays. For the comfort and safety of all guests, dogs must be kept on a lead at all times, and owners are kindly asked to clean up after their pets and dispose of waste in the bins provided.

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It's Showtime at the Stormont Hotel

The festive season may be upon us, but Belfast's entertainment calendar is only getting started.

At the heart of this winter's live music scene is the Stormont Hotel, where an outstanding programme of 13 live tribute shows will run between December 2025 and February 2026, transforming the hotel's Grand Ballroom into a vibrant live music venue.

Located just minutes from the city centre in the leafy surrounds of East Belfast, the Stormont Hotel offers more than luxurious accommodation and dining, it's a destination for memorable nights out. Guests and local music lovers alike can look forward to an eclectic mix of tribute acts celebrating some of the greatest artists and genres in music history.

Kicking off the festive shows on Sunday 28th December is Thunder Rolls: Garth Brooks Tribute, bringing the spirit of country music to Belfast. The following night features The Björn Identity, an exuberant homage to ABBA's timeless pop classics. As we move into

January 2026, the schedule continues with Dolly & Shania: Queens of Country on Friday 2nd January, the iconic Elvis Spectacular on 3rd January, and the Sensational 70s Superstars Show on 9th January. Throughout the month, audiences can also enjoy The Ratpack Revisited, Motown Sensations, Beatles For Sale, and the Neil Diamond Tribute Show. Rounding out the season are The Jerseytones and another performance by the Motown Sensations on 6th February.

Whether dancing the night away or settling in to enjoy decades of classic hits, the Stormont Hotel's tribute series offers something for every musical taste. With spacious complimentary parking and overnight show packages available, it's an ideal way to experience live entertainment this winter.

Visit stormonthotelbelfast.com for more information on the upcoming tribute shows.

NEW ADVICE CLINIC FOR REDBURN AND LOUGHVIEW.

Ards and North Down Mayor Gillian McCollum has welcomed a new outreach clinic to be held at Redburn Loughview Community Forum in Holywood which is provided by Community Advice Ards & North Down (formerly Citizens Advice).

Community Advice Ards and North Down (CAAND) is one of the largest independent advice agencies in North Ireland and has a team of 32 staff and 15 volunteers, who provide advice, help and support on a wide variety of issues, including benefits, debt, employment, appeals representation at social security and employment tribunals, housing problems and many more topics. All CAAND staff are highly trained, with debt staff being authorised by The Financial Conduct Authority to carry out

all debt advice, help and support. This includes applying for debt relief orders, individual Voluntary Agreements and bankruptcies. Business debt can also be advised on.

The new advice clinic will be held every Friday from 2pm-4pm at the Redburn Loughview premises on Abbey Ring and will provide advice, help and support on a vast range of issues, including debt, social security benefits, appeals, tribunals, housing, legal, health, discrimination, employment, immigration,

relationship, land law and consumer issues.

"As a member of CAAND's board, I know firsthand what an amazing service it offers, and I was delighted to help facilitate the introduction of the clinic at Redburn Loughview Community Forum," said Cllr Gillian McCollum, Mayor of Ards & North Down.

"The outreach clinic will help expand the wide range of services already provided to residents by Redburn Loughview Community Forum, and by pooling resources, both

organisations are sure to reach more people in need of support. The advice offered by CAAND is friendly, free and entirely confidential, and I would urge anyone in the area who is worried about their finances or benefit entitlements to make use of the clinic.

"Going forward, I hope the clinic will prove valuable to people in the neighbourhood. As a local representative, I will continue to work with both organisations and help identify interventions for the benefit of the area."



Rapid Access and Specialised Care at Alliance Medical, Holywood Road, Belfast

Alliance Medical's Holywood Road Scan Centre in Belfast is a key regional hub for rapid, high-quality diagnostic imaging.

Committed to clinical excellence, the centre provides crucial insights for effective healthcare planning, ensuring patients and clinicians receive timely and reliable reports.

Located conveniently at 415 Holywood Road, the facility offers a

comprehensive range of modalities. Patients can access quick appointments for core services including MRI, CT, Ultrasound (US), X-Ray, and DXA scans. For complex needs, the centre specialises in advanced MRI procedures such as Prostate and Arthrograms, offering precise diagnostics locally.

Clinical quality is paramount. All scans

are reported by GMC Registered Radiologists and conducted by HCPC Registered Radiographers, guaranteeing expert analysis and patient safety. The centre aims for accessibility, offering competitive private pricing (e.g., MRI from £310; CT from £400). Furthermore, Alliance Medical holds direct settlement contracts with major insurers, including AXA PPP,

Aviva UK Health, WPA, H3, and Vitality, easing the payment process. Logistics are simple, with free on-site parking and a requirement for a healthcare professional referral to book. Contact the centre directly on 02893440700 to arrange a scan.

The Holywood Road centre is part of Alliance Medical's wider network in Northern Ireland, ensuring comprehensive



coverage alongside Hospital, Hillsborough facilities at Antrim Area Scan Centre, and Hospital, Musgrave Park and Magherafelt.

HANNON Coach & Sail is perfect for a city break in Glasgow this New Year!

Direct Belfast – Glasgow Express now departing from the new Belfast Grand Central Station.

An award-winning service offering hassle-free travel, HANNON Coach & Sail is ideal for a New Year city break in Glasgow and the perfect antidote to flying and airport stress!

Already hugely popular with those in the know, the Belfast – Glasgow Express Coach Service is rated 5-Star on TripAdvisor.

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

shopping destination.

Not just shopping, Glasgow is also famous for its fantastic nightlife, and great choice of restaurants and bars. Glasgow is the perfect choice for your next city break away.

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

The service is operated by HANNON Coach and leaves twice a day from



Belfast, Grand Central Station (Stand 18) and drops visitors right in the heart of Glasgow's

'Style Mile'. The simple flat fare allows passengers to pick and mix dates and times of travel to suit and with no luggage charges it makes a perfect travel option for Christmas shopping. There are also a great range of hotels just minutes from Glasgow Buchanan Bus Station.

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

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

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

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

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Make the Call Wraparound Service generates over £63million in benefits

Communities Minister Gordon Lyons has hailed the success of his Department's Make the Call Wraparound Service, which delivered over £63million in unclaimed benefits to people who accessed the service last year.

Make the Call helps people access benefits, support and services to which they are entitled but have not been claiming. Speaking during a visit to the Make the Call Wraparound Service in Knockbreda, Belfast, Minister Lyons said: "These results highlight the vital role our Make the Call service plays in ensuring that welfare support reaches those who need it most."

"This service helps people access the financial assistance they are entitled to, but may not have been claiming, making sure the right money gets to the right people at the right time. "With cost-of-living pressures continuing to affect families and individuals across our society, Make the Call has delivered over £63million in additional support,

leaving those who have benefitted on average more than £100 a week better off. "I am particularly pleased that this includes £7.9million in Pension Credit and £16million in Attendance Allowance for older people, as Pension Credit can unlock a range of other vital supports that are a lifeline for our older generations. "I strongly encourage anyone who thinks they may be entitled to benefits to use this free and confidential service. Our goal is to ensure every penny of available support goes to those who need it most." Since 2005, almost £534million in additional benefits has been generated for people across Northern Ireland, many of whom are vulnerable through age, disability, illness, or adverse



Communities Minister Gordon Lyons visited Make the Call Wraparound Service where he met staff and heard more about how they help people access benefits they are entitled to but not currently claiming

circumstances, through accessing Make the Call. Make the Call works in conjunction with a range of partner organisations such as the NI Housing Executive, Housing Rights, Dementia NI and Carers NI. As well as supporting

people in accessing benefits, Make the Call can direct people to additional supports including: blue badges for car parking or free bus passes; access to local groups to help maintain community connections and social independence; help with health costs;

home safety checks; and assistance with reducing energy costs. To 'Make the Call' you can phone 0800 232 1271 or text ADVICE to 079 8440 5248. Visit nidirect.gov.uk/makethecall or email makethecall@dfcnl.gov.uk

THERE'S A GRAND OUL STRETCH IN THE EVENINGS

As we edge through January 2026, we are witnessing the silent, steady return of the light. While the mornings can still feel stubbornly dark, the evenings are beginning to reclaim their territory. Here is why that extra sliver of sun matters so much and how to make the most of it.

While the Winter Solstice (December 21st) marks the shortest day of the year, the "stretch" doesn't become truly noticeable to the naked eye until the first two weeks of January. We gain daylight at an accelerating rate throughout the month. On New Year's Day in Belfast, the sun sets around 4:16 PM. By January 31st, it stays up until 5:05 PM. That is nearly 50 minutes of extra evening light gained in just four weeks! The benefits of these extra minutes aren't just in our heads—they are in our biology. • Vitamin D & Immunity: Even weak winter sun helps trigger Vitamin D production, essential for bone health and keeping the immune system robust during flu season. • The Serotonin Boost: Natural light increases the brain's release of serotonin, the "feel-good" hormone. It helps combat Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) and lifts that "January slump."

• Circadian Rhythms: Evening light helps signal to your body that the day isn't over yet, preventing that 4:00 PM energy crash where you feel like hibernating. It's a common question this time of year: When do we actually get our hour back? As we operate on Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) during the winter months, we won't officially "Spring Forward" until the last Sunday of March. The clocks will go forward one hour at 1:00 AM on Sunday, March 29th. Until then, we rely on the natural "stretch" provided by the Earth's tilt to brighten our afternoons. Don't let that extra light go to waste by sitting behind a screen. Here is how to reclaim your evening: 1. The "Post-Work" Walk: By late January, you can comfortably finish a 5:00 PM workday

and still catch the tail-end of the sunset. A 20-minute walk in natural light is more effective for your mood than a nap. 2. Early Gardening: It's too early for planting, but the extra light is perfect for clearing debris, pruning roses, or simply surveying the garden for the first signs of snowdrops. 3. Nature Photography: The "Golden Hour" (the period just before sunset) in January produces a unique, crisp light that makes the Irish landscape look ethereal. 4. Al Fresco Cuppa: Wrap up warm, grab a flask of tea, and sit outside for ten minutes. Witnessing the transition from day to dusk helps ground your internal clock. The winter isn't over yet, but the darkness is retreating. Next time you hear someone mention the "grand oul stretch," take it as an invitation to step outside and enjoy the return of the sun!

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ALL-NEW LEAF HITS THE ROAD

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

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

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

Supporting its sleek and streamlined look, Nissan LEAF boasts a host of upgraded exterior features, carefully engineered to catch the eye and confirm

that our zero-emission masterpieces don't skip on style.

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

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

At the heart of the Nissan LEAF is a refined electric motor delivering clean and responsive performance – 215hp of power and 355Nm of torque power the LEAF from 0 to 62mph in 7.6 seconds (Sport Mode / 75kwh



battery). With 4.5 miles/kWh miles energy consumption, all-new LEAF ensures effortless driving with maximum efficiency.

The Nissan LEAF is equipped with a suite of advanced safety and driver assistance features, designed to support confident driving in all conditions. From Intelligent Emergency Braking and Blind Spot Intervention to Rear Cross Traffic Alert and Lane Keep Assist, Nissan LEAF is engineered to deliver peace of mind. Additional features such as the 3D Around View

Monitor, Invisible Hood View, and Front Wide View make parking and navigating tight spaces easier and safer.

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

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

The MINI Paul Smith Edition.

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

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

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

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

Regardless of the body

colour, the specially created Nottingham Green paintwork – a tribute to Sir Paul's hometown – adds sophisticated accents to the side mirrors, the octagonal radiator grille, the wheel hub covers with Paul Smith lettering and as the paintwork for one of the two roof variants.

In addition to the colour variants, numerous details characterise Paul Smith's signature and make the MINI Paul Smith Edition unmistakable: The 'Signature Stripe', a central design feature of the British designer, adorns the roof in Nottingham Green at the rear of the driver's side. The alternative version of the roof features elegant stripes in Jet Black in varying thickness, both matte and glossy. The MINI Cooper Convertible Paul Smith Edition is supplied with a black soft top.

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

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



look. The knitted surfaces on the dashboard and door panels appear in black, while Paul Smith fabrics in tone-on-tone stripe patterns serve as inspiration for the special structure of the dashboard. The Nightshade Blue sports seats are made of Vescin and have knitted textile in the shoulder and headrest areas. Drawn from the Signature

Stripe, the decorative stitching on the steering wheel's textile band is designed in bright colours – quintessentially Paul Smith.

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



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Setting Your 2026 Home Repair Budget

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

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

Calculating Your Annual Maintenance Budget

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

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

per year.

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

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

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

While the annual budget covers ongoing costs (gutter cleaning, boiler service, minor plumbing), a separate Capital Replacement Fund is essential for high-cost, systems-level failures that

often happen suddenly.

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

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

The Upgrade vs. Repair Decision

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

The 50% Rule (Cost vs. Replacement)

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

A Checklist for Hiring a Contractor

The New Year often brings plans for renovation, repair, or that long-deferred major project.

Yet, for many homeowners, the process of hiring a qualified professional—be it a plumber, electrician, or general contractor—is riddled with anxiety.

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

1. Verify Licensing and Insurance: Your Baseline Protection

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

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

building codes.

- Insurance: They must carry both Public Liability Insurance (to cover accidental damage to your property, e.g., if they accidentally drop something through the ceiling) and Employers' Liability Insurance (to protect you if a worker is injured on your property). Without this, you could potentially be held financially liable for significant damages or medical bills.

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

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

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

Insist that the SOW clearly defines what is included

and, crucially, what is not included. It must specify:

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

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

- Payment Schedule: A clear plan of payments tied to completed, verifiable milestones. Avoid large upfront deposits; a reasonable deposit is acceptable, but payments should reflect progress.

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

3. Review Portfolio Examples of Relevant Work

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

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

4. Check References (and Ask the Right Questions)

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

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

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

- How did they handle unexpected issues? (The true test of a good contractor is how they solve problems, not if they run into any.)

- Was the site kept tidy and safe?

- Would you hire them again?

5. Evaluate Communication and Professionalism

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

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

A successful contractor is not only skilled with tools but also skilled at project management and client relations. If you sense poor organisation or a lack of attention to detail now, those issues will inevitably amplify once the construction starts. Choosing a tradesman isn't just about the lowest price; it's about investing in trust, reliability, and quality that will last.

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SETTING YOUR 2026 HOME REPAIR BUDGET

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

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

Calculating Your Annual Maintenance Budget

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

- year.
- Newer Homes (under 10 years): Stick closer to the 1% range.
- Older Homes (over 30 years): Plan for 2% to 4%, as major components are likely due for replacement.
- The Component Age Method (More Accurate): Instead of a percentage, look at the remaining lifespan of your major systems. This is the most accurate approach for long-term planning.

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

Establishing an Emergency Fund for



Major Replacements

While the annual budget covers ongoing costs (gutter cleaning, boiler service, minor plumbing), a separate Capital Replacement Fund is essential for high-cost, systems-

level failures that often happen suddenly. This includes your Boiler/heating system, roof, water heater and exterior paint/render. Start with a Goal: Aim to save a minimum of £3,000 to £5,000

as a readily available, "liquid" emergency fund for unexpected events like a burst pipe or structural repair. Fund the Future: The remainder of your calculated annual savings should go

into a dedicated, high-interest savings account earmarked strictly for these major replacements. This prevents you from taking on high-interest debt when the boiler inevitably fails in mid-winter.

The Upgrade vs. Repair Decision

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

The 50% Rule (Cost vs. Replacement)

If the cost of the repair exceeds 50% of the cost of a brand new, equivalent system, replacement is almost

always the more economical choice. For example, if a new boiler is £4,000, but the repair quote is £2,200, opt for the new unit.

You gain a full warranty and new lifespan for a slightly higher investment.

Age vs. Efficiency (The Payback Period)

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

Repair if: The system is under 10 years old and the repair is minor (e.g., a simple thermostat replacement).

Upgrade if: The system is over 15 years old or you've noticed a significant increase in energy bills. New

A-rated condensing boilers or heat pumps are so much more efficient than older models that the energy savings often pay back the installation cost within a few years.

The Frequency of Failure

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

Efficiency Upgrades That Really Save You Money

When facing the costs of home maintenance, homeowners often ask: Which investments genuinely pay us back?

With rising energy prices, the greatest return on investment (ROI) often comes not from aesthetics, but from efficiency.

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

Insulation: The Foundation of Savings

Before considering new technology, look at the basics. Proper insulation is arguably the best return on investment a homeowner can make.

It's a one-time cost that dramatically reduces heat transfer, extending the life of your heating and cooling systems because they don't have to work as hard.

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

Cavity Walls: If your home has unfilled cavity walls, insulating

them is fast, relatively inexpensive, and stops a huge amount of heat from escaping.

Investing in robust insulation is like putting a thermos around your home—it keeps the expensive, conditioned air in, providing immediate and consistent savings.

Smart Thermostats: Smarter Heating, Not Harder

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

While a smart thermostat doesn't technically generate savings, it maximizes the efficiency of your existing system by eliminating wasted energy. You stop heating an empty house. Furthermore, many models provide detailed energy usage reports, allowing you to identify and adjust inefficient habits. This technology offers a quick ROI, often recouping its cost within the first year through optimised scheduling.



The Leap to Heat Pumps

For major, long-term savings, few systems rival the Air Source Heat Pump (ASHP).

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