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Claire Bacon, Titanic Belfast, Eimear Callaghan, Tourism NI, Paul O'Callaghan, Innovate NI Manager and Anna Lindsay, Titanic Distillers.

TOURISM NI INNOVATES ACROSS NORTHERN IRELAND

Tourism NI has been holding a series of 'Innovate Tourism' workshops across Northern Ireland, finishing up at the Game of Thrones Studio Tour in Banbridge recently.

Among those participating were east Belfast located Titanic Belfast and Titanic Distillers. The interactive workshops aim to demonstrate how innovation is key to business growth, while also increasing awareness and knowledge about what innovation means in a tourism context.

In addition, the workshops advised businesses how to embed innovation in day-to-day operations, creating value and enhancing the visitor experience.

Businesses were also provided with advice and

guidance, including what funding support is available to help generate new ideas to grow. Tourism NI is hosting the workshops in partnership with Innovate NI.

Eimear Callaghan, Head of Experience & Industry Development at Tourism NI, said the workshops have been a "great success".

"It was wonderful to bring our industry together today to discuss and explore innovation and how it can benefit their businesses," she said.

"Innovation is one of the key pillars of our draft

Tourism Strategy and is key to staying competitive and relevant in the ever-evolving tourism landscape.

"The businesses who took part learned about how innovation can drive growth, improve efficiency and can help them exceed customer expectations.

"They also had one-to-one access to experts, who were able to offer advice and guidance on how they can equip themselves with the tools they need to boost innovation in their businesses."

Paul O'Callaghan,

Manager of the Innovate NI programme at Invest NI, said: "Tourism has an important role to play in shaping Northern Ireland's innovation landscape and ensuring the sector continues to thrive in an increasingly competitive market."

"Tourism businesses attending these workshops will learn how to use our innovation framework to embed innovation within their business, ensuring they stay relevant, competitive and enjoy continued success."

Translink advising passengers of essential engineering works in Belfast

The railway line between Lanyon Place and Great Victoria Street stations in Belfast will be closed on Saturday 2nd and Sunday 3rd March 2024.

The closure is for essential rail engineering works to enable the move to the new Belfast Grand Central Station later this year.

Translink's Ian Campbell, Director of Service Operations said: "Work on Belfast Grand Central Station is moving at pace. Set to be the largest integrated transport hub on the island of Ireland this exciting new station will deliver high-quality facilities for our passengers."

"To enable these works, we have carefully planned a range of travel options and bus substitution services to minimise the overall impact and ensure people can continue to make their journeys and access the city. "We urge passengers to

check the website, www.translink.co.uk, or Journey Planner before they travel and allow extra time for their journey."

Ian continued: "Anyone travelling cross border should note that Enterprise train services will depart to and from Belfast Great Victoria Street to Dublin."

"We would like to thank our passengers for their patience while we work to deliver this exciting project to further transform NI's transport infrastructure", he concluded.

Full details are available on the website: www.translink.co.uk; Journey Planner and from Translink's Contact Centre, phone 02890 666630.

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Age NI launches Good Vibrations to support mental health of older men

Age NI has launched a major new programme aimed at supporting the mental health and wellbeing of men in Northern Ireland aged over 50.

Age NI's Good Vibrations programme has been funded by Movember and is one of only 16 projects selected across the world for its 'Scaling What Works' Mental Health Grant funding.

The Movember-funded project has gained the support of the Northern Ireland Mental Health Champion, Professor Siobhan O'Neill, who said, "The Department of Health's 10-year Mental Health Strategy recognises the need to prioritise early intervention. I welcome the focus of this project on males aged 50+, particularly those who are experiencing life transitions in work, relationships, as carers, or who are experiencing the effects of loneliness or social isolation. This project will provide a much-needed pathway for education, intervention and support for older men."

The Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland, Eddie Lynch, also commended the project, saying,

"Supporting the mental health of the older generation is something which needs more focus and Good Vibrations is a fantastic programme which



(l-r): Siobhan Casey, Director, Age NI, Eddie Lynch, Commissioner for Older People NI, Professor Siobhan O'Neill, NI Mental Health Champion and Sarah Ouellette, Country Manager, Ireland, Movember.

bridges a gap in services and support for older males, in order to help them meet specific challenges of later life. Planning for the third age is very important, but it can be a daunting and difficult transition for many people. I'm supportive of any programme that seeks to support people through the various challenges that this transitional time can bring. I congratulate Age NI and all the partners involved in getting this comprehensive programme up and running."

Movember's Programs Manager, Community and

Workplace, Rhiannon Watt said,

"In order to make real and long-lasting change, it's a no brainer for us to fund programs which strengthen the impact of prevention models that are already operating in a real-world environment and enable them to scale successfully."

"With middle aged men and those in their older years feeling left behind, it's important that they receive access to support that is tailored to their circumstances and unique

challenges they face as they move through these phases in their lives."

"Here at Movember, we know that healthier men means a healthier world. That's why we're delighted to partner with AGE NI on their Good Vibrations programme in our ongoing endeavour to help change the face of men's health."

For more information on the Good Vibrations programme, or to request a copy of the Good Vibrations Men's Health Guide, visit www.ageni.org/goodvibrations.

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Unleashing potential - Lewis aces the aisles in Dundonald supermarket

Asda Dundonald has welcomed Lewis Morrow, a member of Four G Day Opportunity Service, to the store to gain valuable work experience.

Four G is a locally based service for young adults with learning difficulties and provides 5-day placements for young adults.

Over the years Sharon McBratney, Community Champion at the store, has built a wonderful relationship with the team at Four G, and was asked to help Lewis gain some work experience.

Sharon explained:

"Jonathan at Four G has worked with us in the past, as we've taken on work placements from Tor Bank School in Dundonald previously. Lewis came to work with us a few years back when he was a student there and he loved it.

"When Jonathan asked if Lewis could come for work experience once a week, we were delighted to have him back! Lewis comes in every Tuesday to work with us now."

Lewis, who has autism, has been working every week at Asda Dundonald since October 2023.

Colleagues quickly spotted he has a talent for tidying and organisation, but he has also been gaining experience on the check-outs, returns and home shopping.

Lewis Morrow said:

"I look forward to going to work in Asda every Tuesday, I like working with Sharon and having a yarn with Henry, the Security Section Leader, at the end of my shift. I like trying new things like home shopping, returns and being on the till."

Lewis' mum, Sharon Morrow, commented:

"Asda has given my son Lewis a great opportunity of work experience and he has been encouraged to have a go at different tasks and duties from returns to home shopping.

"His favourite job is stacking the shelves, allowing him to demonstrate his organisational skills - and he's also been enjoying working on the tills, which has been great for bettering his



L-R; Jonathan Walker of Four G, Gemma Black, E-Commerce Manager, Lewis Morrow and Sharon McBratney, Community Champion 2

social interaction and communication abilities. It's been a real confidence boost for him."

Sharon McBratney agreed:

"Over time I've really seen Lewis' confidence grow, he started off doing a bit of replenishment, stocking and tidying the shelves, showing off his great organisational skills.

He really loves that, and the store always looks incredible when he's been in.

"He's been doing home shopping, returns and going on the check-outs, getting to chat to other colleagues and customers more recently, he's a great addition to the team."

Jonathan Walker of Four G Day Opportunity

Service said:

"The experience Lewis is gaining is invaluable, and it really helps with his physical and mental well-being.

It really wouldn't be possible if it wasn't for Sharon McBratney and the colleagues at Asda Dundonald, who have all been really helpful in Lewis' progress."

NI'S HELPLINE SERVICES URGENTLY SEEK VOLUNTEERS IN BELFAST

Helplines NI is an online directory funded by the Public Health Agency and consists of more than 40 telephone and online support services including Lifeline, Samaritans, Parenting NI, Advice NI, NSPCC and Childline.

It's calling on people in Lisburn to explore volunteering opportunities with a telephone helpline as calls continue to skyrocket, and public funding for these vital services remains uncertain. Helplines NI's members received almost 600,000 calls throughout 2023, and with the economic and political landscape continuing to cause challenges for households, they are bracing for a spike in calls over the coming months.

Clodagh Crowe, Co-Chair of Helplines NI, and Head of Development and Strategic Engagement at Rural Support highlights just how important committed volunteers are to Northern Ireland's network of helplines and is urging people with available time to consider giving up just a few hours a week to help an organisation.

She said, "The charity sector would be devastated if not for its volunteers, and that's likely to remain the case for 2024 with operational costs on the rise, and funding impacted with people having less disposable income and the ongoing, drastic cuts across the public sector.



Pictured L to R - Clodagh Crowe and Claire O'Prey

"Volunteers share a passion for helping others and that sheer will to do good complements the work of full-time staff, crucially allowing services to reach and support a greater number of people. They often start new to the role, but by harnessing their own life experiences can become trusted experts in a cross-section of issues affecting the most vulnerable in our society. Our Helplines NI members provide a variety of vital support services including information and advice, counselling, a listening ear, and befriending, so there's lots of ways people can get involved.

Full training is always provided so I'd encourage any person looking for a rewarding and meaningful way to spend their time to

consider volunteering with a helpline."

Helplines NI not only advocates for an improved landscape for helpline services, it also improves efficiencies for people in need. Member organisations are all briefed on the services offered by each other so that when a person calls a helpline that may not be best suited to their needs, they are directed to the most appropriate service reducing the amount of time they wait for help and improving their experience.

All the organisations that are part of the Helplines NI network provide confidential support via telephone, email, text, and in some cases live webchat. For a full list of members, and for more information visit helplinesni.com

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Bringing vibrancy to Belfast city centre

2024 is off to a promising start for three Belfast businesses, thanks to funding from Belfast City Council.

They join 15 other successful Vacant to Vibrant applicants, all breathing new life into Belfast city centre and re-energising a number of vacant city centre units. And there are many more bringing their business right into the heart of Belfast – ranging from retail to beauty and food and beverage offerings.

A key project in Belfast City Council's Future City Centre Programme, the Vacant to Vibrant capital grant scheme is all about creating a vibrant, unique, and thriving place where people spend time, live, work, study, visit and invest.

Vacant to Vibrant is helping Belfast based independent business Re:lettings Limited (which specialises in residential property lettings, management and maintenance) to relocate in a larger, more prominent unit at Forsythe House.

Meanwhile, Absolute Hair and Beauty, another independent business operating in Belfast for over 30 years, is undertaking refurbishment works to the ground floor unit at 84 Castle Street to support long-term occupation following a short-term



occupation, creating two additional employment opportunities and long-term security for the business.

And food sales and distribution SME, North South Retail Ltd has been awarded a Vacant to Vibrant grant to support the refurbishment of two vacant units to create a café and bakery in Great Northern Mall on Victoria Street.

The £1 million pilot capital grant scheme is open to small businesses, independent retailers, social enterprises, and cultural and voluntary organisations until July 2024; aiming to incentivise both property owners and potential

occupiers to bring vacant Belfast city centre spaces back into use, while supporting the city centre's revitalisation and ensuring sustainable rates growth.

Applicants on the scheme also benefit from wrap around support offered by council's Enterprise and Business Growth team, providing resources to support the start-up or expansion of the business or organisation, including one-to-one mentoring and workshops to help with growth and long-term sustainability.

As part of the council's wider programme to tackle vacancy, and to support the Vacant to Vibrant scheme,

council also provides a matchmaking service through a partnership approach with commercial agent Frazer Kidd, linking businesses with potential units, with the opportunity to access capital funding through the scheme.

Grants of up to £2.5k are available for pop-up ground floor use (minimum four months), up to £15k for active floor usage up to 150m², and up to £25k for active floor usage over 151m².

For more information on how to make an application, go to www.belfastcity.gov.uk/vacanttovibrant or email the team at vacanttovibrant@belfastcity.gov.uk

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£120,000 of funding has been awarded to six proposals from Belfast's creative and digital businesses, artists and innovators to develop innovative visitor experiences to animate and enrich the city's Maritime Mile.

They will collaborate with heritage organisations and communities along the Maritime Mile to develop

prototypes which use technologies such as augmented reality, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence, to encourage more visitors and local people to explore the historic area which connects attractions, sculptures and viewing points on both sides of the River Lagan.

The projects are being supported by the Belfast HUB-IN (Hub of Innovation) programme, developed by Belfast City Council's City Innovation Office in partnership with the Maritime Belfast Trust and funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 initiative, to explore how digital innovation can help to sustain, enhance, and preserve the Maritime Mile's rich and unique heritage.



The successful applicants are being supported to develop a series of prototypes:

Aura Digital Studios Limited - will create an Augmented Reality experience highlighting HMS Caroline's heritage. The free-to-download mobile app will give a fascinating glimpse into the lives of the people who worked on this First World War ship through WebXR, 3D animation and storytelling.

Big Telly Theatre Company - will develop a digital and live interactive experience along the Maritime Mile. The adventure will begin at The Big Fish sculpture where visitors can talk to an AI Salmon of Knowledge, before engaging with live performers and 3D holographic experiences at City Quays, St Joseph's Church, and Sailortown. Community partners include Belfast based artist Corrina

Askin, The America Bar and Sailortown Regeneration.

Darin Smyth - Darin Smyth, in partnership with Belfast Metropolitan College, will develop a new immersive digital experience, Maritime Echoes: An AI Voyage to the Past, bringing local historical figures to life using the latest AI technology. Visitors will be able to engage in 'conversations' with pioneer of Belfast shipbuilding William Ritchie; chairman of Harland and Wolff during the Titanic era Lord Pirrie; social reformer Mary Ann McCracken; Captain Henry Ralph Crooke, who led HMS Caroline during the Battle of Jutland; and a linen mill worker from the early 20th century.

Flax & Teal - will develop interactive 3D/VR rooms along the Maritime Mile, giving visitors a lens into the generations who shaped

the area. They'll work with the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) and local communities to develop new 2D and 3D experiences, using images, video, audio, and historic maps to tell local stories.

Katya Solomatina - will develop 'Memory Anchors', a fine art initiative designed to engage people of all ages to discover new ways of expressing feelings through interactive digital sculpture and storytelling. The artist will collaborate with the Sailortown community on digital sculpting, AI-driven verbal art, photogrammetry and NeRF scanning (extracting 3D information from 2D images), sound recording, and improvisational storytelling to create immersive art pieces.

Ulster Touring Opera - will work with EastSide Partnership

and Whitepot Studios to develop a new immersive experience along the Yardman's Trail using cutting edge technology such as 3D film, AI and Augmented Reality. The Yardman's Trail celebrates the heritage links between east Belfast and the Maritime Mile, and visitors will be able to download a free app and experience residents telling their stories about the area.

Visit www.belfastcity.gov.uk/XRbelfast and www.smartbelfast.city for updates.

The Belfast HUB-IN project is part of a €7.9 million European initiative that aims to transform historic urban areas through innovation and spread public benefits from urban regeneration. It's funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 869429.

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Transforming four Belfast urban spaces: from grey to green

Almost £115,000 is being invested in making the city greener as part of A Bolder Vision for Belfast, thanks to Belfast City Council and the Department for Infrastructure Blue Green Infrastructure fund.

Belfast City Council's 'Grey to Green' initiative invited the city's businesses, social enterprises, charities, and schools to submit expressions of interest in a fund to support temporary green projects in the city centre, and the successful applicants have now been confirmed.

The Conservation Volunteers has been granted meanwhile use of a section of the Belfast Stories site on Royal Avenue to develop a publicly accessible community garden, using polytunnels, raised planters and vegetable beds for a period of around 18 months. During this time, the environmental charity will also deliver an extensive engagement programme, working with range of minority groups, including adults and young people struggling with mental health issues.

Dave Morton Director for NI and Scotland, The Conservation Volunteers added: "We welcome this exciting opportunity to work alongside community and council partners on the transformative Grey to Green initiative. The Conservation Volunteers have been connecting communities with green spaces across NI for



several decades and know firsthand the value that a connection to nature brings for physical and mental wellbeing. The Belfast Stories site off Royal Avenue perfectly lends itself to the development of a shared community space, where we can work with all our local stakeholders to ensure the benefits of Grey to Green have a long and lasting reach."

Killultagh Estates is creating a Living Wall at 32-38 Linenhall Street; a vertical greening project on the façade of a prominent nine storey office building, in the heart of Belfast city centre.

Maritime Belfast Trust will deliver the Queen's Quay Greening Project, transforming a vacant area of land into an attractive green space through planting and helping to improve connectivity and wayfinding on the Maritime Mile.

And Belfast South Community Resources will be creating 'Sandy Glade' on a derelict site at the corner of Sandy Row and Wellwood Street, planting a glade of native trees and pollinator shrubs and a living green wall, landscaping the glade with ornamental sand and gravel areas.

Belfast City Council's 'Grey to Green' initiative

follows a call for expressions of interest to Belfast based small businesses, community groups and schools to create a temporary city centre social farm or garden for a period of around 18 months.

The demonstrator project on a section of the Belfast Stories site forms a key action arising from last August's Belfast Healthy Cities 'Greening the City' workshop and are part of the 'Greening the City' Advisory Group's ongoing work.

For further information, go to www.belfastcity.gov.uk/greytogreen and www.belfastcity.gov.uk/boldervision

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THE KING OF THE FOREST

That would be the mighty oak. But what makes oak trees mighty, or even ‘Kings’?



Well, the ‘King’ question has a simple answer: people like to name things that they love, and oaks are truly beloved muscular and dominant trees.

They have been around for a very long time, following in the footsteps of pioneer trees such as birch and juniper after the last Ice Age, adapting and evolving along the way. An oak can live for 500 to 1000 years, and it seems that they are adapting and evolving for the future. Research has shown that mature oaks should be able to increase their rate of photosynthesis

(how they create ‘food’ for themselves) by up to a third in response to the expected 30% increase in CO2 levels; that’s critical as we, and they, face up to the effects of global warming.

But they’re not just here to be admired for how they look or continue to evolve or be used for making furniture or building sailing ships as in the past; they are critical to nature itself.

Oak trees support more wildlife than any other native tree; birds such as jays, and mammals such as badgers and squirrels love their acorns, caterpillars eat

their leaves, and in turn are food for tits. In fact, 326 species of wildlife are found on oak trees. And their bark, which has vertical ridges and grooves that channel rainwater to the ground, provide the perfect place for many mosses, lichens and liverworts, as well as a happy hunting ground for treecreepers, woodpeckers and all the rest.

It will not always be obvious, but there are two kinds of oak in Britain and Ireland, the Pedunculate (Common or English) oak and the Sessile (Irish) oak. There are slight

differences in the leaves and particularly in how they bear acorns (Common/English on long stems, Irish in clusters on short stalks attached directly to the outer twigs), but they are mixed up all over these islands, both serving mankind and nature, and if any tree should be singled out for particular attention, then it seems appropriate to call them Kings of the Forest.

Sometimes the beech tree is called the Queen of the Woods, but that’s a story for another day...

JVA

2024 Vitality Membership Lisburn Half Marathon, 10K Road Race and Fun Run

Entries are now open for the 2024 Vitality Membership Lisburn Half Marathon, 10K Road Race and Fun Run and with an extra day of training this leap year, there’s really no excuse not to get involved!

Mark your calendars for Wednesday 19 June 2024, when the popular event will once again take place starting from Lagan Valley LeisurePlex.

Runners can sign up online from today and avail of an early-bird entry rate until 30th April 2024. Early registration is strongly advised, following the 2023 event which sold out.

With the New Year not long past, it’s the perfect time to set a fitness goal and with a trio of races to choose from, there really is something for everyone on the night.

The Half Marathon and 10K Road Race, with their flat and fast routes, offer ideal opportunities for individuals hoping to progress to longer distance running or striving towards a personal best.

The 3K Fun Run offers family and friends the opportunity to come

together and complete a fitness journey of their own. Schools and youth groups are encouraged to take part and avail of a group discount all whilst getting active.

Events are inclusive and are open to wheelchair and hand cycle participants.

Launching the event, the Mayor of Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council, Councillor Andrew Gowan said, “The council is delighted to launch the 2024 Lisburn Half Marathon, 10K Road Race and Fun Run. The event is a firm favourite in the sporting calendar and continues to be recognised as a popular fixture amongst runners from across Northern Ireland and beyond. The 2023 event saw huge numbers taking to the streets of Lisburn resulting in the races selling out.

“Given that 2024 is a leap year, I would urge

you all to take advantage of an extra day’s training, set yourselves a challenge and sign up for the Vitality Membership Lisburn Half Marathon, 10K Road Race and Fun Run.

With proceeds from all three events supporting the Mayoral Charity, it really is a great occasion to get moving together.”

Councillor Thomas Beckett, Chair of the Communities and Wellbeing Committee, added, “The Half Marathon, 10K Road Race and Fun Run have been firm favourites with runners and families for over 40 years now. This year’s event is once again being sponsored by the council’s Vitality Membership package, which offers individuals and families a diverse range of activities, sessions in multiple facilities, encouraging those of all generations to look after their health and

wellbeing. Following the success of the 2023 ‘Ditch the Tee and Plant a Tree’ initiative, participants will have the option to plant a tree instead of receiving a race t-shirt, highlighting the council’s sustainability objectives and allowing those involved to make a lasting contribution to the environment.

“I would like to encourage everyone to sign up today for the Half Marathon, 10K or Fun Run on 19 June and look forward to seeing many of you there on the night.”

For further information or to register for the Half Marathon, 10K Road Race or Fun Run, visit www.lisburnhalfmarathon.com. To avail of our early bird rates, sign up online before 30th April 2024. Details can also be found on the Council’s Sports Development Facebook page, ‘Be Active, Stay Active Lisburn Castlereagh.

Lots being achieved and more work to do at Oasis Caring in Action NI Ltd!

Ken Humphrey has just become the new CEO of Oasis NI. Ken has a background steeped in Community Development.

Most recently having served as Director of SOS Bus NI, an organisation attending to the needs of those who are homeless or who have addictions, Ken is keen to move to the grassroots of Community and address issues of all ages, from the early learning stage through to the elderly.

He says: “I am looking forward to working within a grassroots locality based organisation – Despite significant work already completed there remains considerable opportunity, mobility and educational imbalances in various parts of east Belfast. Often that inequality begins in early years! The window for developmental learning is quite short so it’s important to assist children with development as early as possible, so that gaps in equal opportunity identify can be bridged.

Last autumn Oasis early years worked with the Belfast Trust Early Years to open a new Baby room and a brand new cot room! This means our early years facilities now include four unique rooms - Baby room (0-2 years), Toddler room (2-3 years), our Preschool (3-4 years) and afterschools (for Primary pupils P1 to P7). We are presently catering for 72 children! The facility also now offers pick up from no less than 9 local schools and playgroups.

Oasis Caring in Action Ltd has an enthusiastic 40 strong team - projects delivered aren’t exclusively early years. The organisation is involved in Youth Work – helping young people access learning opportunities with ‘Oasis Team’, supported by Prince’s Trust for example. IMAGO OASIS Caring in Action provide a mental health and befriending service.



This service helps adults who have mild to moderate mental ill health to cope with challenges by offering practical one to one structured weekly support. There is also a team of Family workers, walking alongside families which are going through difficult times.

‘A Good Morning’ Team – makes valuable daily phone calls to those who may be isolated and immobile, and signpost to assistance when and where required.

Oasis Caring in Action Ltd takes a multi-faceted

approach to the work it carries out and continues to manage a FoodBank in County Antrim among other initiatives.

Oasis Caring in Action Ltd are also deeply grateful for the many volunteers and all the personal donations! They are always interested in finding better ways of working with other community organisations & projects to better support service users.

For more information about any of our programmes, please Call 028 9087 2277 and www.oasis-ni.org

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How will the cut to National Insurance affect your family?

In last year's Autumn Statement the Chancellor announced a reduction in the amount of National Insurance that employees have to pay. This change came into effect on 6 January 2024.

Employers For Childcare

This small saving is welcomed by families at this time of year when budgets are already stretched, and there will be a little extra going into salaries to help with paying the post Christmas bills.

However, while this is positive, the change to the National Insurance rate will also have a negative impact on parents who are using Childcare Vouchers and are basic rate taxpayers, by reducing the amount of savings available through that scheme.

What is the change and how might it affect me?

From 6 January the main rate of Class 1 National Insurance has been cut from 12% to 10%.

This means that someone on the average salary in Northern Ireland of £32,879 will see an annual gain in their net income of £406.

However, families who are currently making a saving through the Childcare Voucher scheme will have this saving reduced by up to £58 per year, per parent, or £116 per year if two parents in a household are both in the Childcare Voucher scheme.

We are here to answer your questions

The start of a new year is good time



support such as Tax-Free Childcare or Universal Credit.

However, you should get expert advice before applying, as there are different eligibility criteria and requirements for each form of support.

Give Employers For Childcare's Family Benefits Advice Service a call on Freephone 0800 028 3008 and one of our trained advisors will be able to give advice and information, and calculate what is the best form of support you may be entitled to in 2024.

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As a 5-star Employer for 2023 and recipient of the prestigious Cornerstone Award at their National conference, this esteemed care company has cemented its reputation as a pioneering force in the industry.

At the core of their success lies a team of dedicated Care Professionals who are compassionate individuals devoted to making a difference in the lives of others. Their professionalism, empathy, and genuine concern set the standard for excellence in domiciliary care.

Picture this: a Care Professional who is not there to only tick off tasks but to share stories, laugh over tea, and make each day a little brighter.

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above and beyond to ensure the well-being and comfort of their clients.

Home Instead Belfast holds the title of the highest reviewed care company in Northern Ireland, according to homecare.co.uk.

This is built on a

foundation of trust, reliability, and a steadfast commitment to exceeding expectations.

But beyond the reviews, in a world where compassion and empathy are often in short supply, Home Instead Belfast shines

as a beacon of hope and support for individuals and families in need.

If you would like any additional information regarding our services or employment opportunities, contact us on 028 9344 2500 or email info@belfast.homeinstead.co.uk

YOU'LL NEVER WALK ALONE IN LIVERPOOL

Our roving reporter experiences the Mersey Beat

Some Beatles, Anfield and with a very short flight from Belfast – who doesn't love a trip to Liverpool.

For any time of the year there is always something fun to do, wonderful places to eat and excellent hotels to stay in.

If you are feeling the blues, then get on and book that flight and for a place to put your head down look no further than The Resident.

The Resident hotel is in a former industrial building in the RopeWalks neighbourhood.

The RopeWalks district is just a few minutes from Chinatown and a ten-minute walk to Liverpool Lime Street station.

The Resident hotel boasts a 9.6 score for its prime location, and also gives guests discounts at nearby restaurants, while the rooms are spacious and feature a mini kitchen with a microwave, fridge, TV and workspaces.

The staff are fabulous



and the hotel gives the home away from home feel making you feel relaxed and at ease from the minute you step in the door.

If you stay at The Resident then the perfect place to eat is LEAF restaurant on Bold Street, just a two-minute walk away.

If you're looking for something informal and affordable with a relaxed contemporary feel, this

mid-city café-cum-teashop and bar offers all-day eating at competitive prices.

Casually strewn with chesterfields, old-fashioned standard lamps and other retro furnishings, it's just the job if you fancy soaking up the sociable, canteen-style vibe while enjoying the company of friends or family.

The restaurant is a unique and perfectly

located in the heart of the city, serving delicious food and drinks in a relaxed, yet inspiring space.

The striking art deco building has lofty, high ceilings and is home to an array of exciting events.

LEAF is the perfect place to settle in with friends and have an amazing night eating fabulous food and making lasting memories.

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The HEMS team attend patients who are seriously ill or injured, bringing emergency pre-hospital care directly to the scene of an incident with the aim of saving lives, brains, and limbs.



It costs £6,850 every day to sustain this service. Air Ambulance NI is asking you to take part in the Belfast City Marathon and fundraise or donate to keep the life-saving service operational while taking on this fun, personal challenge!

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ALL THAT JAZZ!

Brilliant Corners number 12 is back.



So, what's in store this year? An incredible mix of veterans and young'uns of extraordinary talent – every night different, every night special.

There's a brand-new suite of music written by local legend Stephen Davis, free-playing that'll blow your socks off with Alan Niblock, John Butcher and Mark

Sanders, an improvising supergroup of Christy Doran, Ronan Guilfoyle and Gerry Hemingway, and life-affirming moments from Seb Rochford and Zoe Rahman.

We also welcome four acts to the island for the very first time – Jasmine Myra and her seven piece band, Luke

Bacchus Quartet, Scottish trio AKU!, and French trailblazers NOUT. See them before they go boom!

The Ulster Youth Jazz Orchestra, John Donegan's 'The Irish Sextet', and Tom Ollendorff Trio with Aaron Parks make sure our afternoons are well and truly covered!

As always, you

can pay per ticket or take advantage of our ridiculously good value Full Festival Ticket, giving access to all 11 gigs for £45 (limited number available).

So come along and get your fill of truly incredible music. See you at the front!

For more info See: www.brilliantcornersbelfast.com

Creative Events to Inspire Children at Young Aspects

Aspects Festival has unveiled its exciting Young Aspects programme, offering a range of creative children's events suitable for all ages.

Taking place from 1 – 3 March, at various locations around Bangor, the diverse programme of reading, writing and art events promises to inspire young imaginations.

The festival is delighted to welcome Big Wave Surfer, writer and athlete Al Mennie who will be giving a special talk in Studio 1A, Bangor on Friday 1 March.

Author of children's books Confident Kris and Billy the Basking Shark, Al will share insights into his writing journey and what inspires him.

The renowned Book Clinics presented by Children's Books Ireland, will be held at Bangor Carnegie Library on Saturday 2 March. Come and see the Doctor with a difference! The Doctors will give each patient a unique 'consultation' and a personal prescription, recommending books based on the patient's particular interests!

Young Aspects also features the ever-



popular Woodland Chew and Yarn, Book Inspired Yoga, a Digital Art Workshop, Book Binding, Writing Workshops, a Bedtime Story event and more! All perfect for your little readers, writers and artists!

Speaking about the programme, The Mayor of Ards and North Down, Councillor Jennifer Gilmour said: "Young Aspects

provides excellent opportunities for children to enjoy literature and get creative. The programme of events is both educational and fun and I would encourage everyone to get involved."

Aspects Festival Director, Patricia Hamilton said: "We are delighted to offer this collection of workshops and events which have stories at their core but

presented in lots of different ways and for all ages."

Young Aspects is presented by Ards and North Down Borough Council and will run from 1 – 3 March at various locations around Bangor. Tickets are on sale now.

To view the full programme and to book tickets, visit: <https://aspectsfestival.com/whats-on>

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A FEW SPRING
HIGHLIGHTS IN
BELFAST

Belfast is a city that is always bustling with events and festivals throughout the year, and this spring is no exception.

Here are some of the most exciting events happening in Belfast this spring 2024:

Simple Minds: Global Tour: Simple Minds will be performing in Belfast on Tuesday, March 19, 2024 at 6:30 PM as part of their Global Tour 2024.

Belfast Traditional Music Trail: This is a unique way to experience Irish music. 5 Stop Brunch: Join Taste and Tour on a 3-hour grazing style Sunday Belfast Brunch Tour in the city's finest quirky.

In addition to these events, there are many

other exciting things to do in Belfast this spring.

Another event that is sure to be popular is the **Brilliant Corners Belfast Jazz Festival**, which is taking place from March 1 to March 9, 2024. This festival features a wide range of jazz musicians from around the world, and is a great opportunity to experience some of the best jazz music around.

If you're looking for something a little different, why not make a note to check out the **Festival of Fools**, which is taking

place from May 4 to May 6, 2024. This festival is a celebration of street theatre, circus, and comedy, and features performers from around the world.

Finally, if you're interested in running, the **Mash Direct Belfast Marathon** is taking place on May 5, 2024. This marathon is one of the biggest events in Belfast's sporting calendar, and attracts runners from around the world.

For more information on these events and other happenings in Belfast, check out the Visit Belfast website.



Simple Minds

With 'Bags go Free' HANNON
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Direct Belfast – Glasgow Express now departing from Belfast, Europa Bus Station.

An award-winning service offering hassle-free travel with very generous baggage allowance, HANNON Coach & Sail is ideal for spring shopping 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 £44 which includes the cost of the ferry and a very generous baggage allowance 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, Europa Bus Station 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 city shoppers. There are





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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.

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NORTHERN IRELAND HOME TO UK'S OLDEST DIY FANATICS

NORTHERN Ireland has been revealed as the home of the UK's largest community of DIY-crazed pensioners, a new study commissioned by Hallmark Luxury Care Homes has found.

The study of 2,006 adults, aged 66 years and over – the national retirement age – revealed the most popular pastimes of the country's older generations to show how pensioners are shunning traditional activities in search of new experiences and opportunities.

Make do and mend seems to be the mantra for the over 66's in the country, with nearly a third.

Learning was also a popular aspiration for pensioners in the region, which contained the highest number of older people who wanted to try learning a new language in 2024, showing that you really can teach an old dog new tricks.

And the UK's older generation were revealed to be looking to use their time to



try out things they've never done before, with more than a third (37%) saying they were at least 60 years plus before they started a new interest, hobby, or activity in life.

In addition to DIY around the home, Bee Keeping, Cold Water Swimming, Throwing Pottery and Blowing Glass ranked among the more surprising top ten pensioner pursuits for 2024, while a

number of retirees even aimed to have a go at extreme sports such as parasailing or skydiving.

The research also showed that while mindfulness might feel a truly Gen-Z phenomenon for keeping brains in tip top condition, we could all learn a thing or two from our elders. Across the UK, the average retiree claimed they practised mindfulness

as a day-to-day lifestyle with more than a third (36%) stating they engage in regular daily hobbies to keep their minds active and happy.

The study commissioned by Hallmark Luxury Care Homes, is released to showcase the over 66 hopes and dreams of the nation, and to introduce the 'Hopes & Dreams Concierge' who works

with residents across all 22 of their care homes to organise special activities and opportunities that hark back to goals, passions and desires that residents have had since they were young.

Hallmark's belief is that at every stage of life one can still experience new moments that can ignite a fire within or make them giddy with excitement.

Home interior design trends for Spring 2024.

The interior design world is buzzing with new trends and ideas. According to House Beautiful and Zillow, the following are the top interior design trends for spring 2024:

Statement pieces: In 2024, we will see a shift from filler pieces to conversation starters. Sculptural furniture is coming to the fore, which means that even your smallest side table can make a big statement.

New neutrals: The evolution of Scandi-inspired design, from cool and minimalist to cosy and cocooning, informs an array of warm neutrals in 2024. Greys are being swapped for earthy beiges, contemporary off-whites and taupes that sit so well with the natural materials and modest decoration of Scandi homes.

Ruffles: Ruffles – for the most part applied to cushions and table linen – are adding a bit of fun and whimsy to our homes. It's

usually matched with a gingham print, ice cream shades or candy cane stripes like these fabulous Amuse Bouche examples from Rose & Grey.

The one-wall kitchen: The one-wall kitchen is truly an exercise in ingenuity. This diminutive layout requires a real balance between storage capacity, functionality and flow – it can be tempting to install a whole row of cabinets on your one-wall kitchen, but that can be imposing. Open shelving can be a bit of a visual break, and adds opportunity for decoration – an important element in an otherwise functional space.

L-shaped and chaise sofas: The pragmatic amongst us are saving space with L-shaped and

chaise sofas, turning awkward alcoves into seating.

These sofas are perfect for small spaces and can be used to create a cozy and inviting atmosphere in the living spaces.

Relaxed silhouettes: In 2024, we will see new relaxed silhouettes in interior design. This means that we will see more of comfortable and cozy furniture in our living spaces.

Playful trimmings: Playful trimmings are making a comeback in 2024. We will see more of bold patterns, textured fabrics, and personalized decor items in our living spaces.

Sensory gardens: Sensory gardens are becoming more popular in 2024. They are a great way to connect



way to save money and reduce waste. You can find unique pieces from flea markets and secondhand sellers destined for upcycling and repurposing.

They are perfect for adding a touch of elegance and sophistication to your living spaces.



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SPRING GARDENING GUIDE: CULTIVATING BLOOMS AND BOUNTY

Spring is a season of renewal, and what better way to embrace it than by tending to your garden?

Whether you're an experienced gardener or a budding enthusiast, this comprehensive guide will help you make the most of this vibrant time of year. From planting seeds to pruning, we've got you covered!

1. Seed Sowing: The Miracle of Growth

Raising a fully grown plant from a tiny seed is nothing short of miraculous. As the days lengthen and temperatures rise, it's the perfect moment to sow seeds. Here's how:

Indoor Sowing: Start seeds indoors using trays or pots. Provide warmth, light, and moisture to encourage germination.

Outdoor Sowing: Once frost risk subsides, sow directly into prepared soil. Follow seed packet instructions for depth and spacing.

2. Planting: Giving Life a Rooted Beginning

Planting is an art, and spring offers an ideal canvas. Follow these steps for successful planting:

Choose Wisely: Select plants suited to your climate and soil type.

Prepare the Soil: Clear weeds, amend soil with compost, and ensure good drainage.

Planting Depth: Place plants at the right depth, covering roots adequately.

Watering: Water thoroughly after planting to settle soil around roots.

3. Pruning: Shaping for Beauty and Health

Pruning is essential for maintaining healthy plants



and encouraging new growth. Here's what to prune in spring:

Dead or Diseased Branches: Remove any dead or damaged branches.

Shrubs and Trees: Shape shrubs and trees by cutting back overgrown or crossing branches.

Perennials: Cut back perennials to encourage fresh growth.

4. Lawn Care: A Lush Green Carpet

Your lawn deserves some springtime love too! Follow these tips:

Mowing: Gradually lower your mower blades as the grass grows. Aim for a height of around 2 inches.

Aeration: If your lawn is compacted, aerate it to improve soil structure.

Weeding and Mulching: Tackle weeds early and add a layer of organic mulch to retain moisture.

5. Container Gardening:

Portable Beauty Containers allow you to create mini gardens anywhere. Try these spring container ideas:

Colorful Blooms: Mix pansies, daffodils, and tulips for vibrant displays.

Herb Haven: Plant basil, mint, and chives in pots near your kitchen.

Shady Spots: Ferns, begonias, and impatiens thrive in shaded containers.

6. Wildlife Gardening: Inviting Guests to Your Oasis

Make your garden a haven for birds, bees, and butterflies:

Bee-Friendly Plants: Choose bee-attracting flowers like lavender, salvia, and sunflowers.

Bird Feeders: Hang bird feeders filled with seeds and suet.

Hedgehog Hideaways: Create cozy spots with leaf piles and log piles.

7. Gardening for

Beginners: A Journey of Green Discovery

If you're new to gardening, fear not! We've got resources to guide you:

Plant Types Explained: Understand annuals, perennials, shrubs, and more.

Know Your Plot: Learn about sun exposure, soil quality, and drainage.

Allotment Adventures: Discover the joys of growing your own food.

Remember, spring gardening isn't just about blooms; it's about nurturing life, connecting with nature, and reaping the rewards of your efforts. So grab your trowel, don your sun hat, and let's make this spring a season of growth and beauty!

For more inspiration and detailed guides, explore BBC Gardeners' World Magazine and National Trust resources

All's well when the lawn's well.

Over recent years many of us have found a new appreciation for our garden spaces.

They truly do provide a space for relaxation and recuperation and the best garden is enjoyed alongside a luscious green lawn. Whether your garden is large or small, we're here to help you achieve a lawn you can all enjoy.

GreenThumb Lawn Treatment Service expertly treat lawns – turning them from tired, weed infested grass areas, to lawns you can be proud of. GreenThumb Belfast is family-owned, with a team of fully trained, local lawn operatives.

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can rest assured we will have a solution to transform your piece of grass into a lush, weed-free centrepiece to your garden.

It's not just when we treat your lawn, you'll benefit from GreenThumb. You can contact us any time for

advice on all things lawns, because we know the secret to a perfect lawn is working together. Get in touch today for a FREE lawn analysis and no-obligation quote: belfast@greenthumb.co.uk or 02890 357 850.

TIP: One of the most

important lawn care jobs for a good-looking lawn is correct and regular mowing. As the weather warms up it's likely your lawn will need mowing weekly. You should keep the cut between 25mm (1") and 40mm (1.6") in length.

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TIPS FOR SELLERS TO MAKE BUYERS LOVE YOUR HOME

Turning home viewers into home buyers could be an art or a science, but either way, home sellers have a lot more control over the process - and the final decision - than they may think.

Prospective buyers who are coming to view your home are usually already 'sold' on your neighbourhood and price. You just need to make sure that the property itself lives up to the expectations that have brought them to your door, and turn their hopes that this might be 'the one' into reality.

Create a sense of space

Moving home is very stressful and the number one reason why most people even consider doing so is to have more space, or different space, to do the things they enjoy or to accommodate a

change in family size.

You need to show off whatever space you have, and why a good estate agent will always suggest that you de-clutter tables, countertops and cupboards and let in as much light as possible, and preferably before the listing photos are taken.

Make a great first impression

Increased security is the second biggest motivator for people to brave a house move.

There is no bigger disappointment for prospective buyers than arriving at a home that looked great online and finding that it isn't like



that in reality. Kerb appeal is what you need to get them out of the car and into the right frame of mind to really appreciate your home, and the only way to achieve it is to pay attention to detail.

You need to win them over right from the start with fresh outside paintwork, gleaming varnish, a swept driveway, welcoming porch, well-kept garden and shiny, clean windows.

Create a modern look
You may not have the means, time or inclination to put in a new kitchen or bathroom before you sell, but unless your home is a national monument, the chances

are that most buyers will be looking for a home with as many modern features as possible.

If you are going to repaint, pick an updated neutral that will complement the architecture and flooring of your home. In the kitchen, consider installing new cabinet doors and hardware and new countertops. In bathrooms, try new towel rails, new mirrors, and a new shower curtain or laundry basket, as well as fresh towels, soaps and bathmats for a clean, modern look. As for the rest of your

home, new light fittings and new flooring are some of the most cost-effective updates you can make.

Clean, check and repair everything

The cleaner it is and the fewer dripping taps there are, the better. Some buyers are so critical that even a minor problem that would only cost a few pounds to repair can put them off the whole deal.

Hire a professional team if necessary to give your home a deep clean before you put it on show - and before that, cast a critical eye over every part of the property and

fix anything that is not already in perfect working order, from a loose door handle or a cracked window pane to a temperamental garage door or a rusted gutter.

Put your security on show

Visible security measures are a key attraction. Prospective buyers will be looking for burglar guards and an alarm system at the very least, but if you also have security gates, good outdoor lighting, electric fencing or a CCTV system and other security measures in place, these should be pointed out by your agent.

Gearing Up For a Spring Clean

For many, the onset of springtime is almost synonymous with clearing one's home.



short cycle to freshen your machine.

Moving to your bathrooms, we find a similar problem. The shower is a place that we go to get clean, but if the shower itself is unclean then it can easily fail in our objective. Your showerhead can be easily descaled by filling a sandwich bag with warm water, vinegar and lemon

juice before putting it around the showerhead. Once allowed to soak, the mixture will remove dirt and grime, preventing blockages and increasing the cleanliness of your shower.

Why not add a little shine to your hardwood floors using tea bags? You read that right...tea bags.

The tannic acid contained in tea bags is a

good way of both cleaning and adding shine to hardwood floors. Simply boil a kettle, let a few tea bags steep in the mop bucket before cleaning. Note that this hack only works on real hardwood flooring and not laminate.

As the days begin to get longer and the dark, inclement weather becomes but a distant memory, many wish to refresh their homes by clearing the clutter that has gathered over the last year.

This might be as simple as giving any unwanted clothes to a charity shop or might even span as far as conducting a deep clean across the whole home. If the latter appeals to you, then we have some tips that can make the process much more effective.

It might not be something that you think about regularly, but how clean is your dishwasher?

For many of us, we simply stack up the dishwasher and assume that when the cycle finishes, our dishes will be sparkling and germ free - however this is not always the case. If not well maintained, your dishwasher can accumulate dirt without you even realising, making your dishes dirty even after they have been through a cycle.

One quick hack to fix this is to fill a dishwasher safe container with white vinegar, place this on the top shelf and set it on a high temperature cycle. The results will disinfect and clean your machine. Once done, you can sprinkle bicarbonate soda on the bottom and run a

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LISBURN HEARING CENTRE – MAKING A REAL DIFFERENCE.

Lisburn Hearing Centre is under new management as Scottish audiologist, Colin I'Anson, has bought the business from founder and owner, David Parkinson.

David founded Lisburn Hearing in 2006, and the business has served the local community ever since.

New owner, Colin, qualified as a hearing aid audiologist in 2007 and has 16 years of experience working at House of Hearing in Edinburgh specialising in the fitting of bespoke hearing solutions and

wax removal. Colin moved to Lisburn with his family in the summer of 2022 and began working part-time at Lisburn Hearing shortly after he arrived.

Colin said:

"It's been great to be made to feel so welcome and to get to meet so many people here in Lisburn. I was immediately impressed

by the friendly professionalism of the team at Lisburn Hearing and really enjoyed the interaction with the customers. Being an audiologist is very rewarding as you get to meet so many people and you can make such a big difference to people's hearing and quality of life."

Colin took over

Lisburn Hearing on 4th April and has now had 6 months to settle in. "It's really exciting to be taking over such a well established and customer focussed business.

I'm delighted that David has agreed to remain working on a part-time basis to assist us in a smooth transition, ensuring Lisburn Hearing customers and families always continue to receive a first class service from us. Both wax-removal and hearing-aid-fitting dramatically improve a person's quality of life.

Doing that while providing a personal and consistent service continues to be our priority and this will

continue to set us apart in the future."

David says: "I know Colin will continue with the ethos of the business that I started and will bring a breath of fresh air with his youthfulness and enthusiasm. He has an excellent understanding of the brilliant hearing aids available now, with additional benefits I couldn't have imagined when I started in this business!"

For more information Tel: (0)28 9264 0302, email hello@lisburnhearing.com or see www.lisburnhearing.com.

Lisburn hearing Centre is located at 2a Smithfield Square, Lisburn, just between Greens and McCalls.



Colin I'Anson, has bought Lisburn Hearing Centre from founder and owner, David Parkinson.



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Leaf it to the experts!

Retro trends for Houseplants.

While many garden centres say it is rare and unusual indoor plants that are most wanted

now, the wider trend is for old-fashioned foliage houseplants such as Monstera cheese plants, rubber plants, yucca, ficus and dracaena.

Houseplant sales continue to rise among existing garden centre customers. So much so that Growers have been struggling to meet demand for simple foliage plants.

Cacti and succulents (the darling buds of last year) are also still in high demand. FloraHolland figures show houseplant sales have risen 1.1%

this year, but the average price of the biggest seller, the Phalaenopsis orchid, has dropped by almost 10%, showing an oversupply in the market.

Driving demand is the relatively young generation — that is from teens to 30s — who have a need to return home to some sense of reality using green plants to balance their internet/social media hours spent in virtual worlds on a screen.

Indoor plants are beautiful, can be

nurtured easily, but do not need daily walking or feeding. Houseplants fulfil this role and are introducing a new generation to the world of plants, albeit in a small but vital way. These are the plant lovers of the future so in this respect the huge trend for indoor plants is opening a door to a greener future for all.

The Instagram effect is also driving the younger plant-buying market. The Monstera [cheese plant] is super popular at the moment

and has been for a few years. Nostalgic of the 1970s, the Monstera is in really high demand and some sizes are not always available from growers, which results in having to pay a premium price.

Houseplants have seen huge growth of 50% or more in garden centres and other retailers such as Ikea over the past two years, powered by Instagram pictures, nostalgia and appreciation of the benefits they have for cleaning air in homes.

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MINI MARVELS ARRIVE FOR SPRING

As a 3-door model in its fifth generation, the all-electric MINI Cooper underscores the brand's tradition with its hallmark MINI design and stands for urban driving fun.

The new MINI Countryman has grown in external dimensions and offers its passengers even more space, comfort, and safety – even beyond paved roads thanks to all-wheel drive. The new MINI Cooper and the new MINI Countryman are both fully electric, guaranteeing locally emission-free driving and emphasising the exceptional position the MINI has in its respective segment by combining distinctive design, advanced drivetrain technology and an immersive digital experience.

Electrified go-kart feeling and an immersive user experience take the MINI DNA to a new level. The new all-electric MINI Countryman has grown and emphasises its suitability for setting out on adventures beyond the city limits. In addition, the MINI Aceman is set to premiere in April 2024 as a crossover in the premium small car

segment.

The new vehicles enable locally emission-free mobility and allow MINI drivers to adapt them to their different lifestyles and requirements. The hallmark MINI creative use of space offers maximum flexibility as well as enabling a high degree of variability in terms of interior design. The user experience takes a noticeable technological leap with the MINI Operating System 9, which has been optimised for touch and voice control. The round OLED display, the MINI Interaction Unit, is both an instrument cluster as well as the centre of experiences and comfort.

Textile surfaces revolutionise the aesthetic appeal of the interior by reducing it to the essentials and adding a new level of well-being and warmth.

Going into its fifth model generation, the MINI Cooper 3-door



still embodies the core of the brand. As an all-electric vehicle, the new MINI is available in the Cooper E variant and as the Cooper SE, featuring higher output and range. Within the new MINI family, "Cooper" refers to all MINI 3-door and 5-door

models, and also the MINI Convertible. It is no longer used as an engine specification. The classic round headlights and the striking octagonal grille are the dominant features of the front section, making the model the characteristic face of MINI.

In the interior, the design of the front section harks back to the elegantly minimalist design of the classic Mini with a slim and generous dashboard and a multifunction steering wheel for hallmark MINI go-kart feeling. The central OLED display,

the MINI Interaction Unit, sets a new standard with its high resolution and contributes to the heightened presence of the circular instrument, which has a diameter of 240 millimetres.

The new MINI Intelligent Personal Assistant can be activated

by saying the words "Hey MINI". Being able to control numerous functions with voice control increases comfort, facilitating greater concentration on driving. The newly designed reduced toggle bar with five switches includes all driving functions and is ideally positioned for the driver below the circular instrument. The gearshift has been eliminated to create additional storage space between the front seats. In the wireless charging area in this storage space, mobile devices can be charged and conveniently accessed at any time.

Higher, longer, MINI – with an additional six centimetres in height and thirteen centimetres in length, the new MINI Countryman has grown noticeably compared to its predecessor, offering even more space and comfort. Wider wheel arches and a clear, modern design enhance the crossover aesthetic

appeal of the rugged MINI adventurer.

The MINI Operating System 9, which has been optimised for touch and voice control, together with the central OLED display with a diameter of 240 millimetres and many new, digital additional functions in the MINI Connected Package, noticeably raises the level of hallmark MINI driving fun in the cockpit of the new MINI Countryman. This also becomes apparent in the newly designed multifunction steering wheel with two-spoke design and optional textile strap instead of the classic lower spoke. Compared to the MINI Cooper, the air outlets in the cockpit are arranged vertically and, together with the upright dashboard, emphasise the character of the new MINI Countryman.

The new electric 2024 MINI Cooper arrives in showrooms in April, priced from £30,000.

Searching for roller garage doors that offer unmatched quality at unbeatable prices?

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21 colours and come in two different slat sizes to perfectly fit any opening. Avoid any hidden charges with Garolla, where an instant quote comes inclusive of measuring, fitting and VAT. For more information visit their website www.Garolla.co.uk or, alternatively, give them a call on 028 9603 0058

Maintenance checks every motorist should be doing

Motor insurance experts at One Sure Insurance, have shared their checklist of essential car maintenance tips, to identify whether your car is likely to need any repairs

Many of these checks can be performed at home, but you will need some assistance from a mechanic to replace some of these parts.

Battery performance check

Car batteries supply the electrical current for the starter, engine, and other electronic components, and the car will often fail to start if this is not working correctly. January is a good time to check the performance of the car battery as colder winter weather can affect its ability to hold its charge.

The first, and probably most obvious sign of battery failure, is the ignition struggling to start or the engine not turning on at all.

If your engine starts fine, but you notice a red battery warning light appear on your dashboard this should not be ignored. This warning light often looks like a small rectangular box with a plus and minus sign inside of it.

If this light is permanently on, it indicates a replacement battery is needed, while a flickering



light means the connection may be faulty. You may also notice that the vehicle's headlights are dimmer than they should be since they are receiving less electric power.

Car batteries usually last between three and five years when properly cared for, but various factors can affect their lifespan. You can check the health of a car battery by connecting a voltmeter to see if the

reading is between 12.4V and 12.7V or not, or by seeing if the headlights are dimmer than they should be.

It is recommended to get the car battery replaced by a garage or car repair service due to the risk of acid spillage and exposed electrical wiring.

Brake performance check With some roads being at risk of ice and snow throughout January, it is

important that your brakes work correctly. Although many car models use different brake systems, there are still signs of brake failure that can be spotted before they become dangerous to use.

The brake fluid should be replaced every couple of years, and there are a couple of checks that drivers can do themselves.

Check your dashboard to see if your car brake warning light is on, telling you your brake fluid may be low or that your brakes need replacing if the fluid is already full.

You may also feel hear unusual noises when braking, such as squeaking or grinding sounds from the brake pads.

See if the brake fluid levels are between the minimum and maximum lines in the brake fluid

reservoir under the bonnet on the master cylinder. Otherwise, it might need topping up.

The main indication of broken brakes is the brake pad wear warning light on the car's display board, indicating they may be almost worn out. However, not all cars have brake pad

sensors so have your car checked immediately by a qualified professional if you think your brakes are faulty at all. It is advised that you have your brake discs and brake pads inspected every 10,000 miles anyway to prevent potential accidents, but this depends on your driving habits and car parts.

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A FRESH LICK OF PAINT

Spring is a time of renewal and rejuvenation, and what better way to celebrate the season than by giving your home a fresh coat of paint?

Here are some of the best paint colours to use this spring:

Coral Reef: This shade of coral is perfect for adding a pop of colour to any room. It pairs well with white or light gray walls and can be used as an accent wall or on all four walls of a room.

Fresh Mint: This light green hue is perfect for creating a calming and relaxing atmosphere in any room. It pairs well with white or maroon walls and can be used as an accent wall or on all four walls of a room.

English Yellow: This sunny yellow shade is perfect for adding



a touch of warmth to any room. It pairs well with white or light gray

walls and can be used as an accent wall or on all four walls of a room.

Nancy's Blushes: This soft pink hue is perfect for creating a romantic and feminine atmosphere in any room. It pairs well with white or beige walls and can be used as an accent wall or on all four walls of a room.

Sky Blue: This light

blue hue is perfect for creating a cool and calming atmosphere in any room.

It pairs well with white or earth toned walls and can be used as an accent wall or on all four walls of a room.

Eagle's View: This lavender hue is perfect for creating a fresh and unexpected look in any room. It pairs well with

white or pastel walls and can be used as an accent wall or on all four walls of a room.

Piranesi Pink: This pale peachy pink hue is perfect for creating a soft and romantic atmosphere in any room. It pairs well with white or natural toned walls and can be used as an accent wall or on all four walls of a room.

THINGS YOUR HOUSEHOLD INSURANCE MAY NOT COVER

As your home is probably the biggest, most expensive asset you will ever own, it's a good idea to protect it in any way possible.

This might involve buying CCTV cameras, burglar alarms and in some areas even window shutters, and most certainly will involve signing on the dotted line on home insurance.

The right policy will help you to pick up the pieces should an emergency occur, but it's also important to be aware of the things that aren't covered, many current policies don't cover for accidental damage.

All too often, people forget to read the small print and only find out they don't have adequate protection when they come to make a claim, so here are five things your insurance probably won't cover for you:

1. Fences, gates and moveable property

Believe it or not, fences, gates and other moveable property are not protected in most home insurance policies, so if bad weather is due it's essential to batten down the hatches to ensure extensive damage does not occur. All loose objects including outside furniture and gardening tools should be locked

away and repairs to broken gates must be made in good time to ensure they're not made worse in poor conditions.

2. Structural maintenance

Many homeowners presume that their insurance policy will cover any structural maintenance that needs to take place on their property – but this is simply not the case. Many insurers do not count standard or long-term wear and tear such as loose roof tiles or a crumbling wall as claimable, meaning you'll probably have to foot the bill yourself.

Of course, if lightning strikes and damage is caused this would be seen as a definable event and one which most insurers would cover, but always read the fine print before make presumptions.

3. Damp

While many insurance companies will pay out in the event of a flood – although expect to pay high premiums if you live in a flood prone area – they will not always cover the cost of damp maintenance. Regular damp caused by poor insulation, for instance, is one of the most common exclusions on insurance policies giving many homeowners a headache when they realise they're responsible for treating the damp.

4. Blocked drains

Not only are blocked drains stinky and annoying, they're also not usually covered by home insurance. This is because a blockage is

often caused by people putting the wrong things down toilets and sinks, and therefore many insurance companies aren't prepared to pay out for such general maintenance. The good news is there are many ways to unblock drains yourself from using a good old toilet plunger and a bit of elbow grease to throwing three large tablespoons of baking soda down the sink followed by several glugs of vinegar – the chemical reaction of which gets rid of any gunk that's built up over time.

5. Leaking pipes
If the water pipes in your home are old they may rust and leak. If you notice water dripping from your water system, you might be tempted to jump on the phone to your insurance company, but it's wise to read the details of your insurance policy first. This is because leaking pipes, which have simply deteriorated, are often just considered a generic maintenance issue and are not worthy of a pay out. That said, if the leak has occurred due to a floor, landslide, earthquake or other natural disaster, you might be covered.

Taking out home insurance is a great way to safeguard your property, but be aware that every policy has exclusions limiting what you can and can't claim for.

Disclaimer: This is a collaborative article and always read your insurance policy terms and conditions.

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ESSENTIAL HOME MAINTENANCE TASKS FOR SPRING

Repair rotted wood: After winter snow melts and the April showers leave your property damp, it's a good idea to inspect for signs of rotted wood.

If you find any areas in need of replacement, use a polyester filler to rebuild the damaged areas. First, use a 5-in-1 tool to remove the rotted wood from the area. Then press the filler into the recesses of the wood with a putty knife, building up the layers as needed until you have a smooth profile. You should have between 10-15 minutes to work with the polyester filler before it begins to harden. The new structure will take paint well and won't rot again in the future.

Sharpen garden tools: Pruning, clipping and shearing are most useful when clean, precise cuts to the plant are accomplished, and the only way to

guarantee that is to regularly maintain your tools. Pruning shears, hedge shears and grass clippers each have two sharp surfaces which are finely ground at the factory to their most efficient angle. Pick up a new 10-inch mill file at your local home center, and file the blades along their original factory bevel.

Clean gutters: Clogged gutters can cause water damage to your home. Clean your gutters and downspouts to ensure that they are free of debris. Use a ladder to reach the gutters and wear gloves to protect your hands. Remove any leaves, twigs, and other debris from the gutters and downspouts. Flush the gutters with water to



ensure that they are clear of any remaining debris.

Pressure-wash patios and decks: Winter

weather can leave your patio and deck looking dirty and dingy. Pressure-washing is an easy way to clean

these surfaces and restore them to their original condition. Rent a pressure washer from your local home

centre and follow the manufacturer's instructions for use. Be sure to wear protective clothing and eyewear

when using the pressure washer.

Repair windows: Check your windows for any cracks or gaps that may have developed over the winter. Fill any gaps or cracks in the window frames or invest in new. This will help to prevent drafts and keep your home more energy-efficient.

Clean dryer vents: Lint build-up in your dryer vents can be a fire hazard. Clean your dryer vents to ensure that they are free of lint and other debris. Disconnect the dryer from the vent and use a vacuum cleaner to remove any lint from the vent.

Reconnect the dryer to the vent and run it for a few minutes to

ensure that the vent is clear.

Inspect your roof: Inspect your roof for any damage that may have occurred over the winter. Look for any missing or damaged tiles, and check for any signs of leaks. If you notice any damage, contact a professional roofer to make the necessary repairs.

Clean your chimney: If you have a fireplace, it's important to have your chimney cleaned and inspected annually. Hire a professional chimney sweep to clean your chimney and ensure that it is free of any debris or blockages.

Service your lawn mower: Get your lawn mower ready for the spring

What is the best city in Northern Ireland to buy a home in?

Bangor is the least affordable city in Northern Ireland to own a home in. Meanwhile, Lisburn offers the best work-life balance in the country.

On a national level, five cathedral cities top the list of UK cities with the least disposable incomes after paying their basic bills and mortgage rates. Among bigger UK cities, Bath is the least affordable place to own a home in in England; Newport – in Wales; Bangor – in Northern Ireland; and Edinburgh – in Scotland. Newcastle is the #1 UK city that leaves homeowners with the most disposable income. In Scotland, this is Aberdeen; in Northern Ireland – Lisburn; in Wales – Wrexham.

UK-based data collection experts at Smart-Survey reveal how much

disposable income two average-earning homeowners living and working in every UK city would have after paying their basic household bills and mortgage rate. The study evaluates and compares median property prices and median PAYE earnings, as well as gas, electricity, water and council tax bills in 73 cities across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The mortgage rates are calculated equally, based on a 10% deposit and a fixed 5% interest rate over 25 years.

Which Northern Ireland cities are least and

most affordable for homeowners

Bangor is the least affordable city in Northern Ireland, largely due to having the highest bills (£418) and home prices (£245,000). Median earnings of £1,985 are not proportional to the costs of owning a home in Bangor. After paying their mortgage rate and basic bills, two average-earning homeowners here would have £1,844 to spare for other expenses every month. This is the lowest disposable income of all Northern Ireland cities and £626 below the next least affordable city, Newry.

People in Lisburn enjoy

the best work-life balance of all city dwellers in Northern Ireland. Despite having the second most expensive homes in Northern Ireland (203,161), salaries are the best here (£2,298). Average homeowners living and working in Lisburn can pay their monthly utilities and mortgage and still have nearly £3,000 every month to cover any other household costs.

The median price for a city home in the UK is £260,000. City residents generally earn £2,154 a month. Their gas, electricity, water and council tax (or "rates" in Northern Ireland) bills amount to £348 every month,

while mortgage rates are estimated at £1,520. This leaves two average-earning city homeowners

with £2,440 in disposable income every month

to cover all their other household costs.

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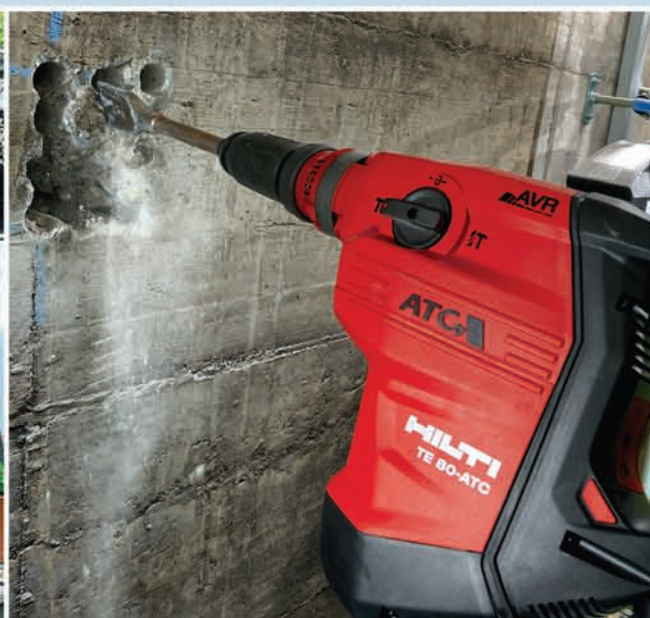
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