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Scarlett Jenkins, (18), from Carrowdore, and Curtis Sinclair, (32), from Newtownards, are the first to secure a one-year placement through the new Student and Leisure and Fitness Associate whilst completing their BTEC Level 3 Sport at SERC's Bangor Campus.

COLLEGE AND COUNCIL INITIATIVE WIN-WIN FOR STUDENTS AND SPORT

A unique initiative between Ards and North Down Borough Council and South Eastern Regional College (SERC), is set to equip sports students with valuable experience needed for the industry whilst they gain their qualifications.

Scarlett Jenkins, (18), from Carrowdore, and Curtis Sinclair, (32), from Newtownards, are the first to secure a one-year placement through the new Student and Leisure and Fitness Associate whilst completing their BTEC Level 3 Sport at SERC's

Bangor Campus.

The Mayor of Ards and North Down, Councillor Jennifer Gilmour, said: "This collaborative approach between SERC and the Council's HR and Leisure service areas has helped to bring this successful scheme to fruition. It has been

a long-held desire for our Leisure staff to have the opportunity to develop a working partnership with SERC and their leisure studies programme. It will help to attract students into working environments in the leisure industry, providing them with a

wealth of experience during their early working life. This will not only benefit students, but it will also benefit both SERC and the Council's Leisure Services."

Continued on page 6

£460,000 road scheme for A2

Infrastructure Minister John O'Dowd has announced that work on a £460,000 resurfacing scheme for the A2 Groomsport Road Roundabout, will commence before the end of February.

The resurfacing scheme will involve the asphalt resurfacing of the Groomsport Road Roundabout and its immediate approaches.

Minister O'Dowd said: "I am pleased to announce that this road improvement scheme represents a significant investment of £460,000 in the North Down area. This work will greatly improve the strength and surface quality of this section of road for the benefit of all who use it.

To facilitate the safe delivery of the scheme it will be necessary to implement an initial phase of lane closures for preparatory works to be carried out in advance of the resurfacing from 9.30am to 4.30pm, Monday to Friday, from Monday 19 February to Friday 29 March 2024.

Local access for residents and emergency services will be maintained at all times during the preparatory

works.

The Department has programmed the work operations and traffic management arrangements to minimise inconvenience, however, road users should expect some delays and are advised to allow additional time when travelling in the vicinity of the works and are asked to comply with all temporary traffic restrictions.

Subject to favourable weather conditions the first phase of work will be completed by 29 March 2024, however, the Department will keep the public informed of any change.

All work will be carried out in line with current public health and health and safety advice, with safe systems of working in place for staff and contractors.

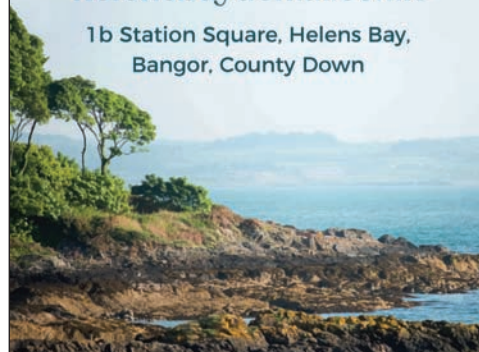
For more information about this and other improvement schemes visit: www.TrafficwatchNI.com.

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ARDS INTERNATIONAL GUITAR FESTIVAL UNVEILS 2024 PROGRAMME!

Ards and North Down Borough Council has unveiled the 2024 Ards International Guitar Festival programme, which will take place in Newtownards from 17 – 21 April.

The festival, now in its 28th year boasts an array of guitar-centric events, including gigs, free fringe activities and an exhibition.

Guitar fans can expect a diverse line-up spanning blues, folk, rock, americana, classical and contemporary music. Renowned for celebrating this much-loved instrument, the festival attracts local and international guitarists, creating a dynamic programme all brought together with the help of guest programmer Anthony Toner.

Highlights of this year's programme include Dom Martin's evening of performance and conversation with a w a r d - w i n n i n g broadcaster Ralph McLean. Martin, a rising star on Northern Ireland's music scene,

brings his natural acoustic guitar skills and authentic 'Belfast Blues' voice to Ards Arts Centre on Thursday 18 April.

On Friday 19 April, Martin Harley, takes to the stage in the Queen's Hall, Newtownards with his spell-binding exploration of roots, blues and slide guitar. With almost thirty years of music-making and global touring experience, Harley combines exceptional musical talent and songwriting with a down-to-earth sense of humour.

Fans of classical guitar will not want to miss American classical guitarist Miles McConnell at Ards Arts Centre on Saturday 20 April. McConnell is active both as an arranger and a performer, a



The Mayor of Ards and North Down, Councillor Jennifer Gilmour, Festival Director Emily Crawford with musicians Miles McConnell and Kyle John Suckling.

role that has taken him to Spain, the UK and around the United States.

Other highlights on this year's programme

include The Grainne Duffy Band with support from Ben Cutler, at Queen's Hall on Saturday 20 April. Backed by her

powerhouse band and joined by local blues legend Ronnie Greer and the accomplished Irish guitarist Jimmy Smyth, this is a night

of blues not to be missed! On Sunday 21 April, singer/songwriter and former Lifetime Achievement Award Winner Sarah

McQuaid graces Ards Arts Centre with her lush, chocolaty voice and engaging personality.

The festival also features the annual Classic Album Brunch, free fringe concerts, featuring Kyle John Suckling and Gavin Ferris, an exhibition by Keery Irvine and more. The Ivy Bar will host blues and rock gigs, culminating in the popular Weekend Wind Down festival finale.

Speaking about the festival, Councillor Jennifer Gilmour, The Mayor of Ards and North Down said: "I am delighted to see the Guitar Festival return to Newtownards for another year. The 2024 programme is a wonderful showcase of both local and international talent,

and I would encourage everyone to buy tickets and support the events."

Ards Guitar Festival Director, Emily Crawford commented: "There's a real flavour of roots music running through this year's festival and for fans of rock and metal a special event on the history of distortion. We have a brilliant programme of local and international artists lined up for you this year with something to appeal to every taste."

Ards International Guitar Festival runs from 17 - 21 April in various venues around Newtownards. For ticket details or to view the full programme please visit the website www.ardsguitarfestival.co.uk or call Ards Arts Centre on 028 9181 0803

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ARDS AND NORTH DOWN HAVE LOWEST RATE OF MOTORING OFFENCES IN NI

Recent policing data analysed by CompareNI.com shows the council areas with the highest and lowest rate of driving offences in Northern Ireland.

The recent policing figures show there were 39,402 motoring offence detections in Northern Ireland in the 12 months from 1st December 2022 to 30th November 2023.*

Antrim and Newtownabbey had the highest rate of motoring offences, with 316 offences per 10,000 people.

Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon had the next highest with 313 offences per 10,000 people, followed by Mid Ulster and Belfast City with 292 and 291 offences respectively, per 10,000 people.

Derry City and Strabane and Fermanagh and Omagh fell around the middle with 288 and 269 offences per 10,000 people, a 6% and 3% decrease for the council areas from the year before.

Lisburn and Castlereagh saw the biggest decrease in motoring offences with a 15% decrease from the same time the previous year, falling from 255 to 218 offences per 10,000 people.

Newry, Mourne and Down also saw a large



decrease in offences, falling by 14% from 303 to 262 offences per 10,000 people.

Ards and North Down had the lowest number of offences per 10,000 with just 159 offences per 10,000 people, however the council area also saw the largest increase in offences up 19% from the same period the year before.

Mid and East Antrim and Causeway Coast and Glens also had a low number of offences with 182 and 198

offences per 10,000 people.

Overall, in Northern Ireland, the total number of motoring offence detections decreased by 8% compared with the previous year.

There was a notable reduction in speeding which was the highest offence group the previous year. Speeding offences decreased by 22% with 1,578 less offences recorded. The highest speed detected by PSNI officers in the latest 12 months was 144mph, on

the M2 in Belfast.

Insurance offences increased by 2% making them the largest offence group recorded with 7,179 offences.

Insurance costs have been rapidly increasing. In a recent survey by CompareNI.com a staggering 82% of people said their car insurance was more expensive this year with a quarter of those surveyed (25%) admitting the cost of insurance had made them reconsider driving altogether.

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Six EUROSPAR stores including EUROSPAR Gransha Road, Bangor and EUROSPAR Moat Street, Donaghadee recently came together to raise over £1,100 for Cystic Fibrosis Trust.

The campaign was organised by Steven Jones, Team Leader at EUROSPAR Rathgael in Bangor, whose two daughters suffer with Cystic Fibrosis. Steven decided to bring his colleagues together to

fundraise for Cystic Fibrosis Trust not only to raise awareness of the condition, but to give back to the charity that has given his family so much.

Steven said, "This charity has helped me and my family in a number of ways, not only providing us with much-needed grants, but my daughters will receive life-saving medication before the age of 12 thanks to the research which has been funded by Cystic Fibrosis Trust.

Steven kicked off the fundraising with a quiz in-store giving one lucky shopper the chance to win a hamper containing exciting prizes, including two gift vouchers for Omeya Day Spa, a voucher for



Six EUROSPAR stores recently came together to raise over £1,100 for Cystic Fibrosis Trust. The campaign was organised by Steven Jones, Team Leader at EUROSPAR Rathgael in Bangor, whose two daughters suffer with Cystic Fibrosis.

Donegans Bar, a bottle of wine, sweets and chocolates.

Steven continued, "I want to thank all our shoppers and the

teams from the other five stores who all got involved to help me raise money for this deserving charity. Their support means a lot to

me and it was great to come together to raise a total of £1,112 for Cystic Fibrosis Trust". The other stores that helped fundraise

towards the total are EUROSPAR Hardford Link, Newtownards, EUROSPAR Portaferry and EUROSPAR Kircubbin.

Alliance meets NI Water on Water Quality and Flooding.

North Down Alliance Representatives Stephen Farry MP, Andrew Muir MLA, and Connie Egan MLA have met with the Chief Executive of NI Water Sara Venning to discuss wastewater infrastructure and flooding in the constituency.

At the meeting, NI Water officials outlined plans for North Down but emphasised that further upgrades would not take place without the required funding.

"The message was clear that NI Water is ready to proceed with much-needed works to increase the network's capacity to deal with wastewater and storm

overflow, however, there is currently a considerable shortfall in capital investment," said Dr Farry.

"Significant upgrades have already been introduced, for example at the Brompton and Strickland Wastewater Pumping Station, and this should be welcomed, but we now must ensure that the

funding is available to allow NI Water to deliver on further improvement. This is essential for a thriving economy, increasing housing stock, and a healthy environment."

Andrew Muir MLA added, "I took the opportunity to discuss issues with overspill at Brompton and Ballyholme, and was pleased to hear more on plans around the Wastewater Pumping Station at the Cotton River in particular.

"It was a useful engagement, and I welcome NI Water's commitment to working constructively, both in terms of environmental protection and planning proposals for North Down. Progress on water quality locally will require a collective response and I will continue to engage with

stakeholders."

Outlining her thoughts on the meeting, Connie Egan MLA stated, "Flooding is a major concern for many residents in North Down, particularly given the unprecedented rainfall last year and implications of climate change going forward. I raised several sites specifically, including the recurrent flooding at Rugby Avenue in Bangor, which is a matter I have also raised with the Infrastructure Minister.

"Finally, we discussed the fence on Bangor's Coastal Path, this is an important issue to the local community. We have repeatedly raised that many residents see this fence as a blight on the coastal path. I am disappointed that NI Water has refused to commit to removing this fence."

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Children’s Books Ireland invite parents/guardians and children to drop in for an informal consultation with one of the friendly Book Doctors, who are ready to offer the best advice for young readers.

When the Book Doctor is ready to see a patient, the consultation begins with some questions about books the young reader previously enjoyed as well as activities, movies, tv shows and video games they enjoy. This lets the Book Doctor know a little bit more about the patient so they can write a book prescription, which is a personalised list of books recommended for the individual patient.

Every patient leaves the Book Clinic with a book prescription to take to their local library or bookshop to have filled. The Clinics will run from



12noon – 4pm on Saturday 2 March and will operate on a first-come, first-served basis. The clinic is FREE to attend, no booking is required. Speaking about the event, Aspects Festival Director Patricia Hamilton said: “We

are delighted that the Book Clinic will be part of Young Aspects this year. This is a fun way to inspire and introduce young readers to books they may not have come across, all tailored to their own specific interests.”

Young Aspects is presented by Ards and North Down Borough Council and will run from 1 – 3 March at various locations around Bangor. To view the full programme, visit: <https://aspectsfestival.com/whats-on>

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Up to 800 Jobs Available at the Ards and North Down Job Fair!

Up to 800 jobs will be available at this year's Ards and North Down Job Fair. So if you feel like you are stuck in a job going nowhere, or if you want to start a new career, make sure Thursday 21 March is in your diary!

This year's Job Fair, which is hosted by Ards and North Down Borough Council and supported by the Department for Communities (DfC) as well as Ards and North Down Labour Market Partnership, will be held in Ards Blair Mayne Wellbeing and Leisure Complex on 21 March from 12pm-3pm, while

a specific session for schools will open from 11am to midday. Labour Market Partnerships, which create targeted employment action plans for council areas, are funded by the Department for Communities, and allow for collaboration at local and regional level to support people towards

and into work. The Job Fair offers an opportunity to meet 60 exhibitors who are offering up to 800 jobs in a variety of sectors including manufacturing, hospitality, finance, catering and retail. Alongside the Council, other local businesses will be eager to meet visitors to the Fair, with some employers holding job interviews on the day. You can also avail of one-on-one support



Tracey Meredith (Caremark) with the Mayor of Ards and North Down, Councillor Jennifer Gilmour, and Libby McCartney (Robinson Services).

and advice on finding a job, including help to build your CV from local support agencies including the Department for the Economy Careers Service, DfC Jobs Search Services, specialist disability organisations and the Local Enterprise Agencies will provide advice on setting up your own business. There will be information stands providing a wide range of useful tips and advice on employment and training.

The Mayor of Ards and North Down, Councillor Jennifer Gilmour, said: "With 800 jobs available in a variety of sectors, this year's Ards and North Down Job Fair will be the biggest that we have ever had. It will provide a fantastic opportunity for jobseekers and those looking to start new careers, or to simply to get support and advice for finding a job. Thursday 21 March

could provide be a pivotal moment to those looking to take the next step in their careers." British and Irish Sign Language signers will be available between 12pm and 2pm. Help with travel costs is available for those in receipt of benefits. Please contact your local Jobs and Benefits office. For more information, visit andbusiness.co.uk/ and andlmp.com.

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Students Help Launch Open Day at SERC

South Eastern Regional College (SERC) is getting set to welcome potential students and their parents/guardians to the College's annual Full-time open evening from 4.00pm - 7.00pm on Thursday 7 March at SERC's Bangor, Downpatrick, Lisburn and Newtownards Campuses.

Heather McKee, Director of Strategic Planning, Quality and Support said, "As young people across the local community are preparing to progress after their GCSEs, we want to invite them and their parents/guardians to SERC to see what is on offer, to meet staff and current students and to explore the facilities. She added, "Visitors will be able to find out more about our

full-time courses, including traineeships and apprenticeship programmes. You will see the state-of-the-art facilities on Campus for a wide range of subjects on offer including Animal Care, Applied Science, Barbering, Beauty Therapy, Computing, Art and Design, Engineering, Health & Social Care, Hairdressing, Creative Media Production & Technology, Plumbing, Sport, Travel & Tourism, Retail, Vehicle Maintenance and Repair. "We can talk you through the applications and admissions process,

as well as help you look at your goals and how to achieve them through a course at SERC. And for those potential students who are undecided about their next steps, our careers advisors will be present to help you explore your options. SERC's support services, pastoral care, and Students' Union teams will be on hand to ensure you are fully aware of all support available for each and every student, to ensure they have successful studies at College. Visit www.serc.ac.uk to unlock your future #BetterOffAtSERC.



L3 National Extended Diploma in Business students (l-r) Luca Faulkner (16) and Rebeka Jaunlinina (18) get set to welcome potential students to SERC's full time open evening

Continued from page 1

Phillip McKelvey, Curriculum Manager, Sport and Uniformed Protective Services at SERC said: "This new initiative affords existing SERC Sports students the opportunity of one-year paid employment at the Ards Blair Mayne Wellbeing and Leisure

Complex in Newtownards. As well as completing their Level 3 Extended Diploma in Sport, they are enhancing their vocational qualifications, and gaining valuable experience which will support both employment and further studies." Sean Fegan, Operations Manager at Ards Blair Mayne Wellbeing and Leisure Complex, said: "The new Student and Leisure and Fitness Associate programme aims to grow talent for the leisure industry. We are delighted to have Scarlett and Curtis join our team following a

successful application and interview. Both students, who have been in the one-year Associate post since October 2023, have quickly become an asset to the smooth running of the Leisure Complex. In addition, both have gained Royal Life Saving Society Level 3 Awards in Pool Lifeguarding." The annual placement will be open to second year Sports students who will benefit from valuable work experience. Associates work on a shift pattern over four days which includes two evenings and weekends. Visit SERC for more information.

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Something super is happening at Oxfam Hollywood

The Oxfam Ireland shop in Hollywood is set to expand, with exciting plans to open the organisation’s first superstore on the island of Ireland in Ards and North Down.

All will be revealed ahead of the official opening in Spring 2024 but right now Oxfam is issuing an invitation to the public to get involved from the beginning. They can do this by volunteering or donating pre-loved and unwanted items.

“The people who volunteer and support our shops are what truly makes them super,” said Trevor Anderson, Director of Trading at Oxfam Ireland. “We’re calling on people to be part of our exciting expansion in Hollywood from the outset.

“We need people to give their time and talents as volunteers. This is a chance to see something new and innovative take shape from the ground up and play a key part in promoting a more sustainable way to shop and live. Our shops also raise vital funds for our work with communities hardest hit by poverty, disaster and the climate crisis. We’re encouraging all enthusiastic people to



Oxfam Hollywood Shop Manager Fiona Anderson, Mayor of Ards and North Down, Councillor Jennifer Gilmour and Oxfam Ireland Director of Trading Trevor Anderson are calling on people to support Oxfam’s plans to open their first superstore in Ards and North Down

apply – as little as four hours a week can make a big difference.”

Trevor Anderson says Oxfam Hollywood also needs donations: “With more rails to fill and more capacity for stock, we’re also reminding individuals and local businesses to donate items to us.

We’re accepting clothes, handbags, shoes and accessories as well as homewares, furniture, books and more. This new venture is more than a charity shop, it’s a community hub and we’re relying

on local support to get us up and running.

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Mayor of Ards and North Down, Councillor Jennifer Gilmour, said: “I am delighted that Oxfam will be opening their first superstore in Ards and North Down. This

will not only help to raise more vital funds for their lifesaving work around the world but will also create new jobs and volunteering opportunities for local people.

Support from local people will be vital to its success so I would encourage everyone to show their support by either shopping, donating or volunteering at Oxfam.”

People interested in volunteering or donating, can email hollywood@oxfam.org.



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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.

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

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 to check that you are receiving the best form of support in your current circumstances. Some households may find they are now better off claiming another form of 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.

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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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This offer excludes holidays and special event periods.

Renowned for eclectic yet charming decor, our cliff-edge hideaway guarantees a shift from magic beach walks to mellow fireside talks. To book your stay, contact our friendly reception staff at 028 2073 1210, email causewayhotel.reception@nationaltrust.org.uk or book via our website www.thecausewayhotel.com/packages

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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

Muir meets with local vegetable producer

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister Andrew Muir has met with local vegetable producer and supplier, Roy Lyttle.

Roy, along with his wife Sheila and son Alexander, have been growing, preparing and packaging seasonal vegetables for over 35 years and supplying to local businesses.

During his visit, the Minister heard about the history of the business, how they grow, harvest and prepare their crops including the use of new and innovative technology. The Minister also had an informative tour of the farm including the packaging facilities where he heard of the work and saw firsthand the multiple stages required to prepare the crops before they are distributed to suppliers.

Speaking after the visit, Minister Muir said: "I'm delighted to visit this horticulture farm on the outskirts of Newtownards. It's been really inspiring engaging with Roy and his family hearing how the business started and has developed over the years, the



Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister Andrew Muir is pictured with Alexander, Sheila and Roy Lyttle on a visit to their farm where they grow, prepare vegetable and supply to local businesses.

work that goes into growing, harvesting and packaging as well as hearing about the new innovative technology being used on this farm to produce high quality crops.

"My department supports the sustainable growth of our local horticulture industry

to help improve its overall productivity and sustainability, grow the economy, and help ensure the stability of the food supply chain.

"I recognise the uniqueness and potential of the horticulture sector and fully recognise the many challenges the

industry is facing. As Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, I am determined to do what I can to support the horticulture industry here in Northern Ireland and I look forward to further engagement with the horticulture sector in the time ahead."

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We welcome Schools and Community groups to visit our farm.

Roy Lyttle has been growing vegetables in Ards and North Down for over 45 years. Scallions, and Leeks are the main crops with Scallions continuing to be harvested until October.

Roy and Sheila's son Alexander now takes responsibility for crop growing and maintenance. When ready, the vegetables are harvested before being trimmed, prepared, washed, packed and labelled in the farm's packhouse.

Products are delivered across Northern Ireland & South of Ireland to multinationals, independent retailers and processors.

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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.

2. 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.



Simple Minds

For more happenings in Belfast, check out the Visit Belfast website.

Get ready for sizzling summer barbecues

In case you missed it, cooking outdoors has undergone a revolution.

Forget burnt burgers and bangers or expensive takeaway pizzas. Today it can be a walk in the park to produce great restaurant quality food in your garden or back yard. Now your outdoor food is only limited by your imagination and even then the best brands give you a wealth of tasty, tried and tested recipes specifically created to help you make the most of their appliances.

The Big Green Egg, beloved by the world's best chefs, is a case in point. With an Egg you get access to literally hundreds of recipes and how-to videos. There's plenty on YouTube too, even some produced by Newtownard's very own Eggsperts at The Stove Yard, who also provide live demonstrations and tastings in the summer months. Whatever style of cooking you wish to undertake a Big Green Egg will make it ever-so easy for you. Sear, roast, bake bread or pizzas, smoke, cook slow and low, cook in the pan or cook Mediterranean plancha style. With the Egg's precise temperature control it's going to be perfection every time.

Traeger Grills and



Smokers, will help you widen your horizons too. You can even control them and set automatic reminders for different stages of the cooking process while you're heading home from the supermarket with the beer and wine. A Traeger Grill will also handle a variety of foods for the biggest of family feasts with ease when you need it to. No wonder it's the USA's number one pellet grill and smoker.

Then there's the UK's own, award-winning Gozney portable outdoor

pizza oven for that authentic wood fired pizza flavour when and wherever you want to make a day of it. How could you resist a delicious pizza every two minutes, especially when there's a queue of hungry kids to keep happy? No need to be a money-saving expert to understand that not only will your pizzas taste so much better because you've made them yourself but also because they'll cost a fraction of what you've been used to paying.

As The Stove Yard's

Pete Gough says "Since lockdown we've seen a sharp increase in interest in outdoor cooking, so this year we're kick starting the barbecue season with some tremendous savings in our Big Spring Sale starting on the 23rd of March. Our customers can then make the most of their new appliances at the very first sign of sunshine. We'll be displaying what we believe are three of the very best brands – Big Green Egg which is exclusive to us, Traeger Grills and Gozney pizza ovens."

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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 cosy 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 cosy 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.

Vintage shopping: Vintage shopping is becoming more popular in 2024. It's a great way

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

Sensory gardens: Sensory gardens are becoming more popular in 2024. They are a great way to connect with nature and create a relaxing atmosphere in your home.

Murano glass chandeliers: Murano glass chandeliers are making a comeback in 2024.

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



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Showrooms can be found at 68 Balloo Road, Bangor and 27 Ravenhill Road, Belfast

Opening times: 8.00am – 5.00pm Monday to Friday, 9.00am – 5.00pm Saturday and late-night Thursday to 8pm. Make sure you drop in during these times for a great deal and a friendly chat!



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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.

With 'Bags go Free' HANNON Coach & Sail is perfect for city shopping in Glasgow!

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.

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– 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. 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.

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Ulster Bank supports RUAS to launch the 155th Balmoral Show

Ulster Bank and the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society have kickstarted the countdown to the 155th Balmoral Show.

With just four months to go until the 2024 event, the two parties met to announce the new attractions for this year and to confirm Ulster Bank will remain as principal sponsor of the show – marking a fifteen-year partnership between the organisations. Returning to the Eikon Exhibition Centre from 15-18 May, this year's Balmoral Show in partnership with Ulster Bank will feature new attractions including a kids' farm, a mini Land Rover experience and sheep dog trials, along with the usual mix of livestock classes, food exhibitions and funfair attractions. 2024 will also see the introduction of a new Sustainability Village. As the agri community begins to farm more sustainably, the Sustainability Village will house a host of companies who have already made the switch and are working in areas such as renewable energy, efficient energy solutions,

environmental causes and recycling and waste reduction. Ulster Bank colleagues will also be exhibiting in the space with information on Lombard, green finance propositions, and green mortgages. Operations Director at the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society, Rhonda Geary, said the Sustainability Village was just one of a number of new initiatives visitors can expect at this year's event. "With just four months to go until we open the gates at Balmoral Park, plans are already underway to deliver a truly world-class event and ensure that the 155th Balmoral Show is bigger and better than ever. We are particularly excited by the new Sustainability Village and the platform this will provide for companies to engage with visitors, farmers, and food producers, to showcase the opportunities that exist for businesses incorporating sustainability into their



day-to-day operations. "Thanks to the support from our principal partners at Ulster Bank, we have been able to add more exciting attractions to the programme and we are confident that we can build on previous events and put together

four fantastic days of entertainment and enjoyment for the 110,000 visitors expected to attend the Balmoral Show." Early bird tickets for this year's event are already available to purchase online and the details of livestock

competition entries, show opening hours, and the full programme of events will be available on the Balmoral Show website. For more information about how Ulster Bank can support your business needs, visit www.ulsterbank.co.uk/business

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Gearing Up For a Spring Clean

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

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 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.

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The publication editor told Woodstoc :

"Despite the obvious hardships the last two years have brought to the UK we've seen SME's work tirelessly to adapt and overcome a myriad of challenges, and we believe more than ever the incredible dedication by these enterprises should be recognized. We are delighted to give you great news that Woodstoc Ltd has been Awarded Best Timber & Garden Suppliers – County Down."

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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




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TOYOTA PREPARES NEW AND UPGRADED MODELS FOR 2024

Toyota will look to build on its record-breaking sales success in 2023 with a series of new and upgraded models during the coming year.

One of the key introductions will be a new battery electric model based on the Urban SUV Concept revealed at Toyota's Kenshiki forum in early December last year. The production version will be the most compact and accessible model in a planned line-up of six Toyota dedicated BEVs to be launched by 2026.

The Urban SUV Concept has a compact body set on strong shoulders and a high driving position. Drawing on Toyota's experience developing the successful Yaris Cross, space is maximised in a flexible interior that can easily be adapted to prioritise passenger or load capacity as required.

Both front and all-wheel drive powertrains will be available, together with a dual battery strategy: customers will be able to choose between two battery options, with different capacities to suit their priority for accessibility or driving range.

Keeping the focus on pure electric power, the bZ4X mid-size SUV remains a key player in Toyota's multi-path strategy towards achieving full carbon neutrality in the UK and Europe by 2035.

The Yaris Cross range

will expand early in 2024 with introduction of an additional, more powerful, 129bhp version of its 1.5-litre hybrid electric powertrain. In addition, the model gains a fully digital driver's instrument display and the latest Toyota multimedia system with cloud-based navigation for journey planning with up-to-minute traffic intelligence. The Toyota Safety Sense package of active safety and driver assistance systems is boosted with new and enhanced functions. And for customers looking for the last word in equipment specifications, an exclusive new Premiere Edition model joins the line-up.

A similar package of changes including the new powertrain option, digital user experience and enhanced safety provisions – is also scheduled for the Yaris Hatchback. This promises to maintain the strong market performance of Toyota's smallest hybrid electric model and its UK best-seller.

At the sporting end of the Yaris spectrum, a new GR Yaris is lined up for release this year. The latest version of the high-performance hatch, developed by Toyota Gazoo Racing, comes with a more power from its



turbocharged three-cylinder engine, a new Gazoo Racing Direct eight-speed automatic transmission that provides super-fast shifting and a redesigned driver's cockpit. The car's body rigidity and suspension have been increased, with a focus on even stronger competition driving performance.

At the other end of the size scale, an all-new Land

Cruiser is due for launch towards the end of the year. Toyota has taken Land Cruiser back to its origins as a strong vehicle that can be trusted to do the job in the toughest conditions, while incorporating new technologies to ensure it delivers exceptional performance both on and off-road. Under the skin, there's a new vehicle platform supporting

the classic body-on-frame construction that's fundamental to Land Cruiser's all-road capabilities. Meanwhile the exterior design moves to classic, sharp-edged look with heritage-influenced details. Power is from a turbocharged 2.8-litre diesel engine, with a 48-Volt mild hybrid electric system to follow in 2025.

This month marks the start of customer deliveries of the all-new Toyota C-HR. True to the spirit of the original model, this coupe-inspired SUV sports radical, eye-catching styling. Under the skin, there's the latest, fifth generation of Toyota's hybrid electric technology; later in 2024 the range will grow to include the option of an even more efficient

plug-in hybrid electric system for the first time.

The choice of Toyota plug-in hybrids will also increase during 2024 with the much-anticipated arrival of the all-new Prius Plug-in, following its introduction in continental Europe last year. Notably, the model was recently named the North America Car of the Year 2024.

The British-built Corolla Hatchback and Touring Sports go from strength to strength, newly equipped with fifth generation hybrid technology – a key element in them securing the 2024 What Car? awards for Best Family Car and Best Estate Car.

RAV4 remains in high demand in both hybrid electric and plug-in hybrid electric forms. For the former, there's a new grade structure for 2024, with Design, Excel and GR Sport versions, all of which come with a new Rear Seat Reminder system as standard, alerting the driver if a child or pet has been left behind on the back seats. The plug-in hybrid line-up now comprises two grades – Design and GR Sport.

Toyota Professional


The Toyota Professional range of light commercial vehicles will continue to grow through 2024, with

new models and a complete range of electrified vehicle options.

This year began with the introduction to the UK of the new-look Proace medium duty van. The pure electric Proace City EV will make its UK market debut in the coming weeks, while later in the year the introduction of the large Proace Max van – including an EV version – will give Toyota coverage across the full LCV spectrum. By the end of the year, all Proace family members (including the Proace Verso EV people carriers, classified as passenger cars) will adopt the new family exterior styling and updated equipment specifications.


The distinguished history of the Toyota Hilux will open a new chapter with the launch of a new 48V mild hybrid electric version. An electric motor will support the pick-up's 2.8-litre engine, giving more responsive acceleration, improved braking and a smoother ride, together with greater fuel efficiency.

The line-up will also welcome a new Land Cruiser Commercial van, based on the new generation model and benefiting from its upgraded on and off-road capabilities.



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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

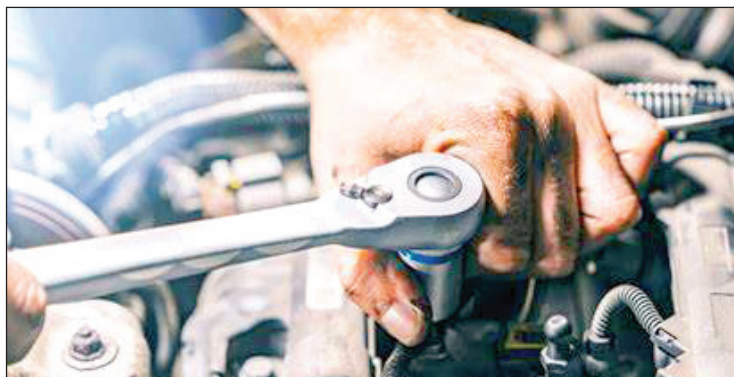
Many of these checks can be performed at home, but you will need some assistance from a mechanic to replace some of these parts.

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.

VAUXHALL OFFERS NEW CUSTOMERS ONE YEAR'S FREE EV CHARGING CREDIT IN PARTNERSHIP WITH TESCO

Vauxhall is partnering with leading supermarket Tesco to provide new Vauxhall electric vehicle (EV) customers with one year's free charging credit at stores across the country.

Powered by leading provider Pod Point, Tesco holds 2,700 charging bays across 619 Tesco stores nationwide making it the country's largest supermarket charging network, with a mix of 7kW, 22kW, 50kW and 75kW charging stations.

While the charge points are accessible for all EV drivers, new Vauxhall retail customers who purchase an electric Vauxhall car or van direct from a Vauxhall retailer will be able to benefit from one year's worth of free charging credit when visiting Tesco.*

As part of the partnership all 2,700 charge bays across Tesco stores will be updated with a Vauxhall & Tesco co-branded livery.

With millions of visitors per month and over 3.8 million charging sessions per year, Tesco stores are found within a 10-minute drive for over 70% of the UK population, allowing greater ease and convenience for EV drivers across the country.

Vauxhall's partnership with Tesco comes as part of its Electric Streets of Britain initiative. Electric Streets of Britain was introduced to address the lack of on-street charging provision in the UK, following



exclusive research that revealed over 70% of UK councils surveyed did not have a published strategy in place for residential on-street charging for electric vehicles, and that 69% of local authorities had yet to install any on-street chargers.2

Through Electric Streets of Britain, Vauxhall has established an 'Enablement Fund' to help improve Local Authority understanding of residential on-street charging needs, working with leading charging operators Charge, Connected Kerb and SureCharge.

UK motorists who want to have on-street residential EV chargers installed near them can register their interest at www.electrictowns.co.uk. The information in this new

national database will then help councils across the UK to determine where best to focus their investment and help as many people as possible to make the switch to electric.

By the end of this year, Vauxhall will offer a fully electric version of every

car and van model in its line-up. Vauxhall was the UK's best-selling electric van manufacturer in 2023, while the Corsa Electric was the UK's best-selling small electric car and the Mokka Electric the best-selling electric compact crossover model last year.

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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

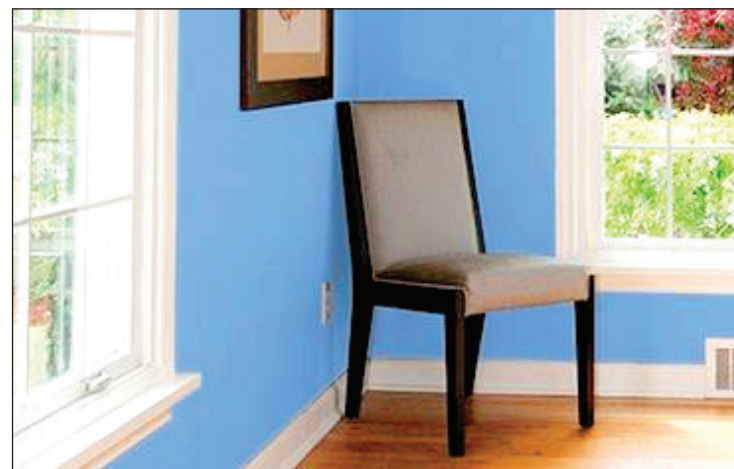
gray walls and can be used as an accent wall or on all four walls of a room.

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 Blush: 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.

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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 1.

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

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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 SmartSurvey 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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