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Staff at the Family Unit in Downe Hospital which has been praised for its compassionate Patient centered approach.

Funding announced for Three Greenways

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council has welcomed the announcement of funding from the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) to carry out feasibility work on three new Greenways across the district.

The funding was announced in January by Infrastructure Minister Liz Kimmens as part of the Department's continued support for councils to develop active travel and greenways infrastructure.

All three routes were identified through extensive public consultation and stakeholder engagement and score highly within DfI's Strategic NI Greenways Ranking Index. The Council will now progress the procurement of a specialist consultant team to undertake the surveys and technical investigations required to deliver the feasibility studies.

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DOWNE HOSPITAL'S FRAILTY UNIT A CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

The Downe Hospital's Acute Frailty Unit in Downpatrick, which opened its doors 10 years ago, has been praised for its compassionate patient centred approach to its older and elderly patients, right in the heart of the community.

The Unit provides a 'one stop shop' health MOT with staff providing a comprehensive, same day health assessment for patients, preventing hospital admission, if possible.

The Frailty Unit's

services are designed to ease what can be a complex and stressful healthcare journey for older people. By offering assessment, treatment, follow-up and support in a single location, the Unit allows for smoother access to services at the

right time.

Patient Father Sean Rogan, described the Frailty Unit, its staff and treatment as a, "Centre of Excellence." "This place is excellent, the staff are courteous, helpful and so professional. Coming

to the Unit offers me a complete MOT. I have seen the Consultant, the Nurses have taken my bloods and I have had an x-ray. It is all here and everyone is so kind."

Continued on page 4

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Davina's Ark honoured after All-Island Pride of Place Win

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council Chairperson, Councillor Philip Campbell, hosted a civic reception recently.

The event celebrated Davina's Ark, winners of the Community Wellbeing Initiative Award at the All-Island IPB Pride of Place Awards.

The group was nominated through the Council's Newry DEA Forum. The reception recognised the organisation's outstanding work supporting individuals and families affected by addiction across the district, as well as the dedication of its staff, volunteers and supporters.

Speaking at the event, Chairperson Councillor Philip Campbell reflected on his experience of the Co-Operation Ireland judging visit, organisers of the IPB Pride of Place Awards, and the profound impact of what he witnessed. He said, "It wasn't just the programmes or services that impressed me – it was the atmosphere. The warmth the moment you walk through the door. The sense of safety and acceptance that surrounds every person who seeks help. A genuine belief that every individual, no



matter their struggle or story, is worthy of care, dignity and hope."

Acknowledging the significant challenge addiction poses to individuals, families and communities, Chairperson Cllr Campbell said, "At Davina's Ark, I saw hope being restored. I saw lives being rebuilt. I saw families finding strength again and I saw a team who refuse to let anyone walk their journey alone."

The Pride of Place judges commended

Davina's Ark as, "an organisation serving a deeply traumatised sector of the community with extraordinary love, compassion and empathy," recognising its provision of 24/7 support to individuals and families.

Councillor Philip Campbell added that while the organisation's work is often carried out quietly and without recognition, its impact is felt across the district. He said, "Your work is not loud or boastful but



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Continued from page 1

Consultant Dr Cathal Foy shared how the Frailty Unit offers patients a much more homely environment.

"We aim to see eight patients a day and that can vary."

We find the benefits of the Frailty Unit is to offer holistic care and to ask the patient what they want and to try to facilitate that



as much as possible. We can access our wards directly from this Unit, so we have that smooth transition for our older patients, should that be required."

Ward Sister Caoimhe Murdock added how the Frailty Unit offers a, "Wrap around service for older people."

"We carry out blood pressure checks and our patients are seen by medical professionals with investigations carried out on the same day.

Our Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy teams are here and our aim is to discharge people home where they are at their most comfortable."

Having been in her role for the past seven

years, Caoimhe spoke passionately on how she, "Couldn't imagine working anywhere else."

"I love working with our older population. We are a small team and it just feels like a family."

Advanced Practitioner Occupational Therapist Meghan Webster explained how the Frailty Unit is a fantastic resource for the local community. "It is a one stop shop with everything our patients need, carried out in one day, and that is crucial for our frail, elderly population.

Our patients are keen to remain in their own routines and at home and we support them as best we can to ensure that happens."

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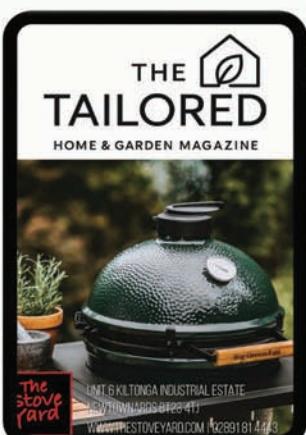
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NEWCASTLE CENTRE REDEVELOPMENT INTEGRATED CONSULTANCY TEAM APPOINTED

Plans to redevelop the Newcastle Centre have reached a major milestone with the appointment of an Integrated Consultancy Team to progress the project into planning.

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council has appointed Belfast-based McAdam Design as the Integrated Consultancy Team (ICT) for the redevelopment. The team will begin work by coordinating a comprehensive programme of public consultation, ensuring the views of local residents, businesses, community groups, stakeholders and sports clubs play a central role in shaping the future of the centre.

The redevelopment has the potential to deliver a high-quality, multi-purpose facility that meets the needs of the local community, supports health, fitness and wellbeing, and enhances Newcastle's appeal as a destination for visitors, while contributing to wider economic and tourism benefits across the district.

Welcoming the appointment, Newry,



Mourne and Down District Council Chairperson, Cllr Philip Campbell, said, "The appointment of McAdam Design as the Integrated Consultancy Team marks a significant milestone for the redevelopment of the Newcastle Centre. This is real progress for the people of Newcastle and the wider district.

"Importantly, this next phase gives the public an opportunity to have their say on what they want from this facility. I look forward to seeing McAdam Design work with the community to turn this shared vision into a modern, vibrant centre that will serve generations to come."

Martin Hare, Managing Director at McAdam Design, added, "We are delighted to have been appointed as the Integrated Consultancy Team for the redevelopment of the Newcastle Centre.

This is a highly significant project for Newcastle and the wider district, and one that presents an

exciting opportunity to create a modern, inclusive and sustainable community facility.

Public engagement will be central to our approach. We are committed to working closely with local residents, businesses, stakeholders and the Council to ensure the final design reflects local priorities and aspirations, and we look forward to progressing this project from consultation through to delivery."

The public consultation is due to commence in the Spring, with further details and updates communicated through local press and via Newry, Mourne and Down District Council social media channels.

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Downpatrick Scheme to Build Stronger Communities

A scheme to redevelop the historic Grove area in the heart of Downpatrick has become a catalyst for a wider community led project that will be delivered over the next two years.

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council is working alongside the Downpatrick Regeneration Working Group delivering the Living High Streets Framework in the town which is also being supported by the Department for Communities.

The historic Grove in the shadow of Down Cathedral was identified as a priority site in Downpatrick and benefited from financial support from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF).

Building on the investment, a community clean-up was the spur for an application for a wider community-led project which is being supported by the PEACEPLUS Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

A new Downpatrick Growing Together initiative entitled Growing Relationships Over Vibrant Environments (GROVE) aims to build stronger, more connected communities through the development of shared, inclusive spaces and activities that encourage mutual understanding and cross-community collaboration.



Newry, Mourne and Down District Council chairperson, Councillor Philip Campbell said, "it's exciting to see the GROVE project take a significant step forward.

"This fantastic initiative funded by PEACEPLUS will bring our community closer together through shared spaces, workshops, creative sessions, biodiversity days and much more. Over the next two years we will work together to foster pride, strengthen cross-community relationships and create a more vibrant and inclusive

Downpatrick."

The Downpatrick Growing Together initiative is designed to engage with a wide range of community groups, schools and colleges and the GROVE project will feature workshops, clean-up events and planting, an urban forest school programme, creative sessions, biodiversity and bioblitz days, recording flora and fauna.

It also aims to strengthen cross-community relationships and reduce social divisions, develop and enhance the Grove area as a shared, civic space,

fostering pride.

Other key elements of the initiative include empowering local changemakers, fostering lasting peace-building and nurturing a culture of respect and creating pride amongst Downpatrick's diverse population.

At a meeting of the Council's Economy, Regeneration and Tourism Committee on January 19, it was agreed to approve acceptance of a Letter of Offer from PEACEPLUS 1.2 Empowering Communities for the Downpatrick project.

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Scheme to help business owners

Owners of vacant and derelict commercial properties across the district are being offered the opportunity to apply for financial support to help restore the buildings.

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council's Local Economic Partnership has secured £4.5m from the Department for the Economy.

The support package aims to help business owners breathe new life into properties, stimulate new investment and support the growth of new and existing businesses.

The Council, in partnership with Newry and Mourne Enterprise Agency and Down Business Centre, is working on an audit of under-used and derelict

properties to understand the scale of the issue across the district.

Applications for grant aid up to £200,000 are expected to open within the next few months, with the onus on property owners to submit bids to bring buildings back into use.

Council chairperson, Councillor Philip Campbell said, "securing grant aid to help property owners breathe new life into buildings to help regenerate town centres is a good news story for the district".

He said the Department

for Economy's financial support will play an important role helping business owners improve how their premises and respective town centres look and stimulate investment.

"The Department's grant aid can help regenerate our town centres and has the potential to increase football and boost the local economy," Councillor Campbell added.

The Commercial Property Revive and Reimagine grant is designed to assist

commercial growth across rural and urban areas within existing settlement limits, stimulate local economic activity, attract new business and provide space for existing enterprises to expand.

The current audit of vacant and derelict buildings is focusing on establishing a baseline for dereliction and their location to inform decisions on target interventions for regeneration funding.

The first tranche of funding to help transform vacant buildings into vibrant new premises is expected to be available in the Spring, with Council staff presently developing application forms and assessing criteria.

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council is one of 11 district councils across Northern Ireland to have established a Local Economic Partnership (LEP) to deliver on the Department for the Economy's Regional Balance Fund.

The Partnerships are part of the government department's new strategic approach to locally led economic development, with the Council also working with the Department for Communities to ensure it maximises every available funding opportunity.

TACKLING WORK-RELATED ILL HEALTH

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council is working alongside the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI) to promote the importance of tackling major causes of work-related ill health.

The initiative, aimed at protecting workers' health and wellbeing, is part of HSENI's year-long Workplace Health Campaign addressing occupational diseases such as cancers, chronic lung conditions, musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) and work-related mental wellbeing.

It urges everyone to become aware of occupational diseases that can arise out of workplace activities if hazards are not properly controlled.

The initiative challenges all involved to find out if they have the information, they need to remove the risk or reduce workplace health risks to an acceptable level. In 2023/24, an estimated 640,000 days were lost due to work-related illnesses.

During a visit to the Downshire Civic Centre on 22 January, hosted by Council Chairperson, Councillor Philip Campbell, the HSENI revealed that work-related ill health is estimated as having a societal cost to Northern Ireland of over £390 million each year, with average figures indicating



Council Chairperson Philip Campbell (second right) is with (from left) HSENI Chief Executive Robert Kidd, Sinead Murphy (Director of Sustainability and Environment NMDDC) and HSENI Deputy Chief Executive Nikki Monson.

that there could be over 300 deaths per year and thousands more suffering health problems due to work-related illnesses.

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council Chairperson, Councillor Campbell welcomed the opportunity to support the campaign and said, "highlighting that

safeguarding workplace health remains a key regulatory responsibility for all employers across the council area.

"Our support for this campaign reinforces that workplace health is not solely about meeting compliance standards — it is fundamentally about valuing people."

The Chairperson added, "A healthy workforce is essential for productivity, stronger community engagement and a thriving local economy. Through this joint effort to promote the campaign across the district, we aim to foster safer, healthier working environments and reduce the risk of occupational illness."

Views sought on Sustainability

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council has released its first draft Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy 2026-2030 which will see the Council take action to reduce their impacts on Climate Change and guide the district towards achieving net zero status by 2050.

Launched last month, the public is being encouraged to have its say on the document which sets out areas for action on sustainability and climate change to help the district address the challenges it faces.

At the heart of the strategy is achieving a net zero, greener, healthier,

sustainable district by 2050 where people, communities and businesses thrive and are resilient to the impacts of climate change.

The comprehensive strategy is open to public consultation until March 13 and sets out the Council's vision for a low-carbon future, outlining

how sustainability will be embedded across all Council operations and services.

The draft strategy also highlights the vital role local people and organisations will play in driving district-wide climate action to protect the area's fragile environment and the benefits it provides for residents, visitors and current and future generations.

The draft strategy looks at how the Council will act to reduce its carbon emissions, its impact on climate change and meet its requirements under the Climate Change Act (NI) 2022.

The draft strategy seeks to align climate action and other key strategies including the Council's biodiversity strategy, tourism strategy, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty management plans and its 10-year masterplan for the UNESCO Global Geopark.

To take part in the consultation visit www.newrymournedown.org/consultations and for further information or to request consultation documentation, contact besustainable@nmddc.org or telephone 0330 137 4000.

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Plan to Build on Success of Make It Local Campaign

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council is planning to build on the success of its Make it Local campaign which has profiled over 100 businesses since its launch.

The organisation plans to appoint a creative communications consultancy to support the Council to provide a further boost to the business community in the new financial year.

Faced with sustained and increasing pressures over recent years, from rising operating costs to shifts in customer shopping behaviour, local businesses have struggled.

The Make it Local campaign was designed to make businesses more visible by showcasing their products and services and encourage residents and visitors to shop locally, contributing to a more resilient and sustainable local economy.

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council chairperson, Councillor Philip Campbell said, "money spent locally supports jobs and boosts the district's economy."

He said the Make it Local initiative has been a great success and it's great news for the business community that it is being extended.

The Council-driven



initiative to support the business community provides a free platform to showcase and promote products and services.

It also recognises the critical need to strengthen the Make it Local brand and build on the success of previous campaigns, to maintain momentum and enhance the initiative's reach and impact across the district. Since 2021, a broad mix of 104 retail and hospitality businesses

across the district have been profiled.

Last year, 25 businesses were supported through a range of funding initiatives including the Small Settlements Regeneration Programme supported by the Department for Communities, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, with the investment delivering a major district-wide

campaign with the assistance of a digital and communications agency.

In the wake of the successful initiatives, the Council targeted digital advertising campaigns to align with key tourism/cultural events including Wake the Giant, the Ulster Fleadh and Newcastle's Eats and Beats and Restaurant Week, amplifying the shop local message at a time of high footfall and increased visitors to the area.

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leaves twice a day from Belfast, Grand Central Station (Stand 18) and drops visitors right in the heart of Glasgow's 'Style Mile'.

The simple flat fare allows passengers to pick and mix dates and times of travel to suit and with no luggage charges it makes a perfect travel option for Christmas shopping. There are also

a great range of hotels just minutes from Glasgow Buchanan Bus Station.

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"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.

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

New figures released by NISRA lay bare a devastating truth: 290 people were registered as having died by suicide in Northern Ireland in 2024.

Each number represents a life, a family shattered, and a community left grieving. This is not a statistic to be quietly absorbed — it is an urgent warning.

In response, PIPS Suicide Prevention Charity has launched its campaign, "Too Many Lives Lost to Suicide. Stand with PIPS Charity. Demand Change." It comes at a critical moment, as the delivery of Northern Ireland's Mental Health Strategy — a strategy designed to reform services and save lives — faces severe disruption due to

funding cuts. At a time when demand is rising, within a broken Mental Health system "

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

enough?"

Though PIPS receives no government funding for its core services, it continues to absorb increasing pressure from long NHS waiting lists and overstretched statutory services. The charity warns that without a properly structured and resourced mental health system, every organisation — and every family — will continue to feel the strain.

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

more lives. As a society we simply cannot afford to step backwards.

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

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

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

Hope cannot be scaled back.

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

Wading for Worms – the Oystercatcher

Peep peep peep peep peep peeppeep peeppeeppeep...



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

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

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

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

Around 60,000 oystercatchers spend the winter around the Irish coasts, the residents supplemented by migrants from Iceland and

Norway. While their numbers are in decline, they are still relatively common and easily recognised, and certainly one of the waders that I enjoy seeing and hearing.

Although they will occasionally visit farmland to feed....and in the past few decades have been seen breeding and feeding at inland loughs.... they are primarily birds of the marine edge. Despite their name,

they seldom eat oysters, preferring cockles and mussels which they prise or break open using that massive, pointed beak, their diet supplemented by lugworms and other large invertebrates.

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

JVA

Fitzpatrick

Northern Ireland is currently the strongest-performing property market in the UK, with prices up around 9.5–10% year-on-year (NI House Price Index, Q1 2025).

What's driving that strength?

- Strong demand for good homes (especially family houses)
- A steadier borrowing outlook than we've seen in recent years
- NI still offers solid value compared to many UK regions
- For local sellers across County Down, that's a real confidence boost:

More buyer activity = more viewings

- Well-presented homes are achieving strong interest
- The right pricing strategy can deliver a smoother sale



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Planting the seeds of hope.

HONEST FOOD, COOKED WITH CARE AT THE PHEASANT, ANNAHILT

Tucked away in the rolling countryside of Annahilt, County Down, The Pheasant has long been a go-to for locals and visitors offering hearty food and a friendly welcome.

Now that spring is just around the corner, we're excited to launch a brand new menu, all 'fired' up thanks to our Bertha wood burning oven.

Bertha brings a whole new flavour to the table. Think juicy steaks with flame-kissed edges, slow-cooked lamb, and beef burgers seared just right, all with that deep, smoky taste only real fire can create. We've kept the classics you love and added a few fresh ideas, all cooked over wood for an authentic rustic

flavour.

Whether you're in our traditional cosy bar with a real fire roaring in the background or in the main restaurant area, The Pheasant is the perfect place to pop by for a pint and a bite, or stay a while with family or friends over a long, lazy lunch or dinner. Either way, expect good food, a relaxed atmosphere, and real County Down hospitality.

Come try our new menu or special offers such as - any 2-courses for £26 - or



the meat sharing platter for 2, at £49.

We're proud of the creations by our culinary team and we'd love for you to try them! Expect honest food, cooked with care, and

served in a spot that feels like home.

Menus are live now check out our website at <https://thepheasantrestaurant.co.uk>

Booking is a good idea, appetite is a must!

Schools' Environmental Poster Competition Winners

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council Chairperson, Councillor Philip Campbell, welcomed pupils and guests to the Council Chamber in Downpatrick for the Schools' Environmental Poster competition prizegiving.

The annual competition invites primary and secondary school pupils throughout the district to design a poster on an environmental topic of their choice. Ten pupils' posters were selected as winners from hundreds of entries received from over 50 schools.

Dobrusia Mankowska of St Mary's Primary School, Barr and Alex Doyle of Assumption Grammar School, Ballynahinch, will have their posters displayed on a billboard in Newry City and Downpatrick in early 2026.

Chairperson, Cllr Campbell said, "Everyone here today is a winner. I am highly impressed by how you all have been able to use your obvious artistic talents to highlight important environmental issues such as Climate Change, Single Use Plastics and the damaging litter it creates. I look forward to seeing Dobrusia



Newry, Mourne and Down District Council Director of Sustainability and Environment, Sinead Murphy (left), with Alex Doyle from the Assumption Grammar School, Ballynahinch, Newry, Mourne and Down District Council Chairperson Councillor Philip Campbell, Eamon Keaveney (third right), Head of Sustainability NMDCC, Dobrusia Mankowska, from St Mary's PS, Barr, and Conor Sage (right), NMDCC Assistant Director of Sustainability and Environment.

and Alex's posters transformed into billboards in early 2026."

The 10 winners, who were presented with a framed copy of their poster and a voucher by Cllr Campbell, were primary school pupils Eoin Tumelty, Sacred

Heart PS, Dundrum; Éanna McKibben, St Columba's PS, Kilkeel; John McArdle, Clonalig PS, Culloville; Dobrusia Mankowska, St Mary's PS, Barr and Erin Mackin, Carrick PS, Burren. Secondary school winners were Kirya

Young, St Louis Grammar School, Kilkeel; Hannah Bradley, Sacred Heart Grammar, Newry; Alex Doyle, Assumption Grammar School, Ballynahinch; Daniel Campbell, Abbey CBS, Newry and Shea Friary, St Joseph's Boys' High School, Newry.

WINTER WARMER PACKAGE

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Escape to the Coast with Our Winter Warmer Package

As winter sweeps across the North Coast, The Causeway Hotel invites you to unwind with our signature Winter Warmer package with our perfect two night escape beside the world-famous Giant's Causeway.

Set against a dramatic backdrop of coastal cliffs and sea views, our historic hotel offers the ideal setting for rest and rejuvenation this season. Whether you're wrapping up for a beachside stroll, exploring the unique geology of the Causeway stones, or settling in our cosy bar with a drink in hand, The Causeway Hotel provides a

timeless, peaceful retreat.

Available from £330 midweek and £350 at weekends, the package includes:

- Two nights accommodation
- A three-course dinner on both evenings in our 1836 Ballroom
- Breakfast each morning
- Complimentary entry to the Giant's Causeway

Visitor Experience

Guests can enjoy hearty food, coastal views, and the kind of warm Northern welcome that turns a short break into something truly memorable. The charm of our cliffside location, combined with the comfort of thoughtfully designed rooms and friendly service, makes this a winter stay to savour.

So whether you're planning a quiet couple's getaway, a mid-season recharge, or a chance to explore one of Northern Ireland's most iconic landmarks, the Winter Warmer offers a little bit of everything.

To book, call us on 028 2073 1210 or visit our website at www.thecausewayhotel.com

Let the coast call you back this winter.

Fitzpatrick

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We are pleased to offer for sale this high-quality agricultural field extending to approximately 2.7 acres. Located in a prominent position with excellent road frontage, this land represents a significant opportunity for local farmers, neighbours, or those looking for a strategic land holding in County Down.

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- Folio: DN18589 Whether you are looking to expand your existing acreage or secure a manageable plot in a sought-after area, this field offers great potential and ease of access.

To find out more or to discuss this listing, please get in touch with our team today:

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Community focus for local Specsavers store

The team at Specsavers Downpatrick closed off 2025 with a strong focus on their local community.

Katie Gillen, Director and Dympna Murray, Optical Assistant, paid a visit to St Brigid's Primary School. Katie and Dympna educated the pupils on how the eye works, the importance of eye health, taking care of your sight and what happens during an eye test.

Luke McLellan, optical assistant and Cora Conway, pre-reg optometrist, from the team also attended the Falls Prevention Roadshow.

The roadshow is designed to target those who may be at risk of falling in their own home. Specsavers Downpatrick took part in the roadshow to educate customers about their eye and hearing care services, as well as their Home Visits service, which provides at-home eye tests and hearing checks to people who are unable to leave their



home unaccompanied.

Katie Gillen, Director at Specsavers Downpatrick, commented, "Being locally owned and run, the community is at the heart of our Specsavers store and of everything we do. We are committed to getting out into our community in any way we can, and we

local area, reaching customers of all ages and informing them of our range of services."

Jordan Jackson, Director at Specsavers Downpatrick added, "A lot of our team are local to Downpatrick, so it's important to us to give back to the community in any way we can, and we

already have a number of plans to get out into our local community throughout 2026."

For more information on Specsavers Downpatrick or to book an appointment, call 028 4461 2246 or visit www.specsavers.co.uk/stores/downpatrick

Olympic Lifts; making steps safer one stairlift at a time.

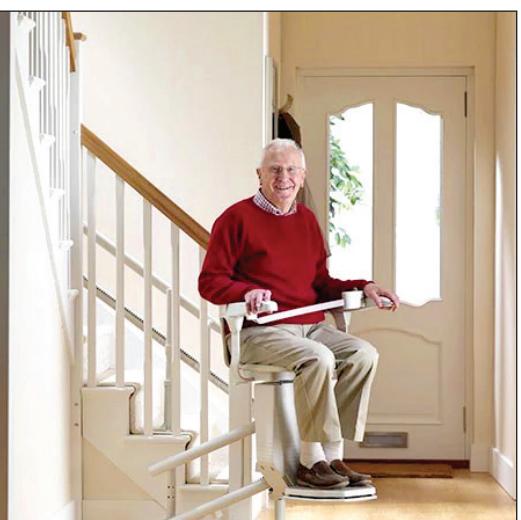
Olympic Lifts; making steps safer one stairlift at a time.

Olympic Lifts is your trusted partner for a wide range of accessibility products. Based in Lisburn, our easily accessible showroom just off the M1 showcases several Home Elevators and a range of straight and curved (single and double rail) stairlifts.

Our strategic location allows us to provide rapid and efficient maintenance and support throughout Ireland, with vehicle tracking ensuring the closest technician is dispatched in the event of a fault.

A key area of our expertise lies in Stairlifts, for which Olympic Lifts. Our extensive range of products is designed with a refreshingly modern aesthetic to integrate beautifully into any home, whether classic or contemporary. We offer Stairlifts for all types of staircases, including:

- Curved stairlifts: Expertly designed to navigate winding or complex staircases, effortlessly handling curved bends, intermediate landings, and corridors.
- Outdoor straight and curved stairlifts: A revolutionary solution for split-level properties, cliff-set homes, or providing access to lower gardens, garages, or cellars.
- Straight stairlifts: Reliable and space-



saving options for straightforward staircases.

Beyond Stairlifts, Olympic Lifts also supplies, installs, tests, and maintains Passenger Lifts, Access Lifts, Goods Lifts, escalators, and Moving walkways.

We are proud to have completed almost 20,000 projects over the past four decades. Recently, we launched our new

machine room traction drive access passenger lift (the Eclipse), a versatile Hybrid Lift suitable for both domestic and commercial properties, offering numerous sizes and finish options.

Our commitment to continuous development, investment, and product advancement ensures that Olympic Lifts offers the most up-to-date, highest

quality products and services. This dedication translates to an improved purchasing experience, enhanced efficiencies, and cost savings for our valued customers.

For more information on our range of Stairlifts and other lifting solutions, please contact us at 02892 622331 or visit our website at www.olympiclifts.co.uk.

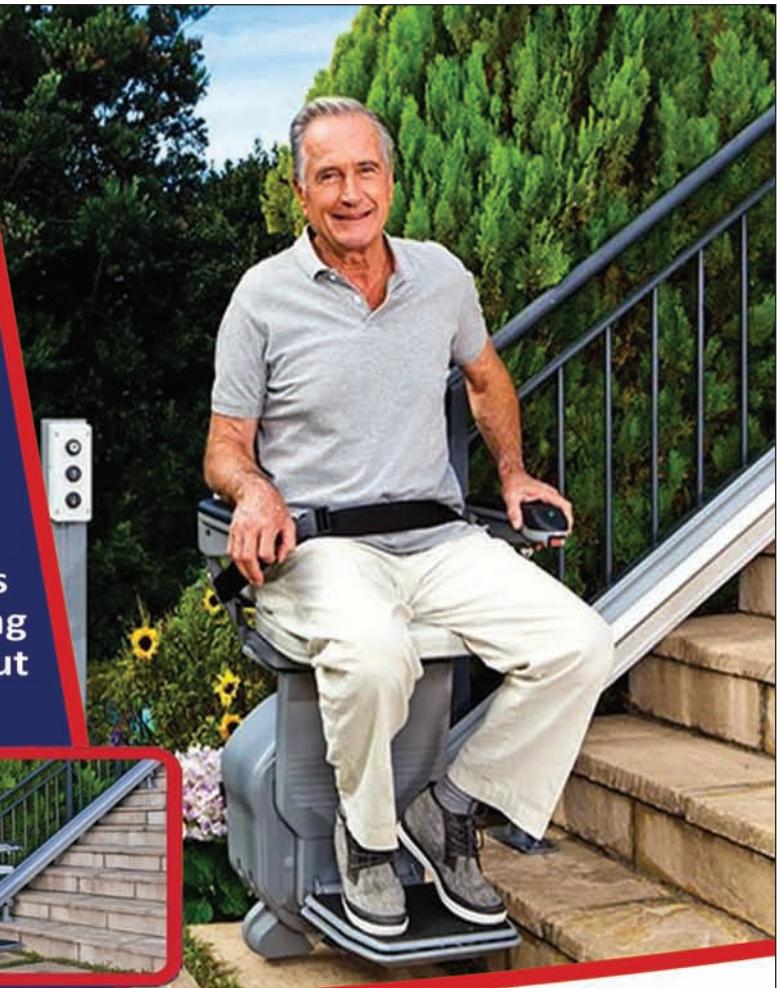


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www.olympicstairlifts.co.uk



BIG BRANDS LEADING THE WAY INTO 2026

A timeless interior essential for homes & businesses across Northern Ireland – by The Blind Spot Belfast

When it comes to transforming a room, most people think of paint colours, flooring, lighting or furniture. But one of the most powerful upgrades you can make — for both style and practicality — is often overlooked: window blinds.

At The Blind Spot Belfast, we've fitted blinds in everything from family homes and new-builds to offices, salons, schools, retail units and large commercial spaces. No matter the setting, the reason blinds continue to stand out is simple — they deliver the perfect blend of interior design impact and everyday performance.

3. Light Control You Can Adjust Throughout the Day

Natural daylight is beautiful, but too much glare can ruin a room's comfort — especially when it hits TVs, computer screens, shop displays or office workstations.

Blinds give you the power to control light levels with ease. This makes a real difference in:

- Family living rooms
- Bedrooms and nurseries
- Home offices
- Workplaces and meeting rooms
- Retail spaces and salons

With the right blind, you can create softer lighting, reduce glare, protect interiors, and still enjoy the brightness of the day.

4. Energy Efficiency That Makes a Difference

A comfortable home or workplace should feel warm in winter and cool in summer — and your windows play a huge part in that.

Blinds act as an extra layer of insulation, helping to

reduce heat loss and make rooms feel cosier. In warmer weather, they can also help block harsh sunlight and stop rooms overheating.

This is one of the biggest practical benefits for both homeowners and business owners — because it's not just about how a room looks, it's about how it feels and functions daily.

5. Practical, Durable, and Easy to Maintain

Blinds are made for real life — whether that's kids, pets, busy mornings, open-plan living or commercial footfall.

Many modern blind fabrics are wipeable, hardwearing and easy to keep clean, making them an excellent choice for:

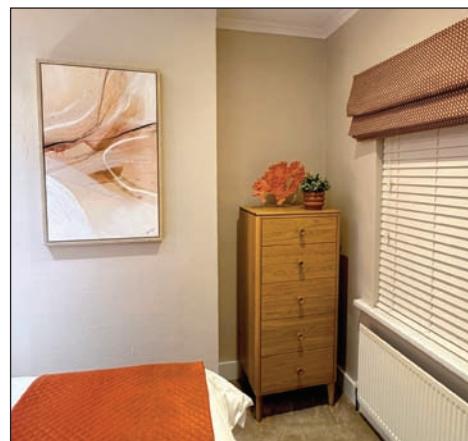
- Kitchens
- Bathrooms
- Schools and nurseries
- Offices
- Healthcare settings
- Hospitality spaces

They're a smart investment for interiors that need to look great, but also stand up to everyday use.

6. A Professional Look for Businesses

First impressions matter, and window furnishings are one of the quickest ways to elevate a commercial space.

Blinds can instantly make a business look more refined, consistent and well-branded. They also provide



comfort for customers and staff — reducing glare, increasing privacy, and improving temperature control.

Whether you're fitting one office window or an entire building, it's the kind of upgrade that makes your space feel more premium and purposeful.

Tailored to Every Window – Even the Awkward Ones

No two windows are the same — and that's where we come in.

At The Blind Spot Belfast,

we specialise in made-to-measure solutions, including options for larger windows, unusual shapes, and spaces that need something a little different. From the first consultation to the final fitting, our goal is to make

the process easy, efficient, and stress-free.

The Blind Spot Belfast

If you're building, renovating, refreshing your home, or upgrading a commercial space — blinds are one of the simplest changes that make the biggest impact.

Whether you want sleek and modern, soft and homely, practical and durable, or something that makes a statement, the right blinds will elevate your space instantly.

The Blind Spot Belfast offers expert advice, professional measuring, and stunning blinds designed to suit every style and budget — helping customers across Northern Ireland create interiors they love!

Tullywest Manor is celebrating over 30 years in business!

Tullywest Manor is situated in a beautiful rural setting, overlooking the hills, lakes and farmlands of the Co. Down countryside.



It opened its doors to its first residents on 17th March 1989. The aim is to provide high quality services catering for the individual needs of each resident, ensuring that privacy, dignity and respect of each resident is maintained at all times.

Residents coming into care here are encouraged to maintain their normal social interests, hobbies and outings with relatives and friends as well as participate in activities and outings arranged by the home. Residents views and suggestions for social

activities, outings are sought at Resident meetings and actioned if appropriate.

Tullywest Manor features a large lounge, dining room, entrance hall with seating area and a spacious conservatory, where residents can circulate and meet with each other and relatives.

Each tastefully decorated bedroom, most with ensuite, offers complete privacy where residents are encouraged to express their own personal tastes.

Tullywest recognises the need for a person-centred approach to care. Residents views and suggestions for social

more about the Residents lives helps us tailor our care to each individual need.

Tullywest Manor recognises that residents are individuals with family and relatives of their own and encourage this bond to continue. They aim to create a comfortable atmosphere of homeliness, happiness and caring.

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Based in Ballynahinch Caoimhe Cassidy is a fully qualified professional with over four years of experience in the industry. Caoimhe is a past winner of the NI B-Beautiful Award for best creative make-up artist in NI.

Her repertoire extends beyond traditional makeup application, offering a holistic approach to beauty that includes all beauty treatments for female & male including:

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- Lamination
- Traditional & Korean Lash Lift
- Makeup Application
- PMU - Powder Brows

Whether you are preparing for a major event or simply maintaining your routine grooming, Caoimhe

Cassidy Artistry provides a professional environment dedicated to high-quality service and client satisfaction.

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North Down and Ards Women's Aid

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

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

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

- Coercive Control (a pattern of intimidation, degradation, isolation and control with the use or threat of physical or sexual abuse.
- Psychological and / or

- Physical or sexual abuse
- Financial or economic abuse
- Harassment and stalking
- Online or digital abuse.

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

NDAWA have a service called the One Stop Shop (OSS) which offers free, immediate and confidential



service for women who have been affected by domestic abuse. Women will have access to legal support, benefits advice, housing support and safety advice.

The OSS meets every 2nd and 4th Tuesday of the Month in House Church, Newtownards, 10am - 12pm. If you would like more information about NDAWA services, or the OSS, please contact NDAWA on 028 9127 3196 or email info@ndawomensaid.org

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BIG BRANDS LEADING THE WAY INTO 2026

NEW INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT INCLUSIVE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

TITANIC Belfast has announced the launch of a series of new accessibility initiatives as part of its continued commitment to ensuring an inclusive and welcoming visitor experience for every guest.

With accessibility and inclusion a key focus for the world-leading visitor attraction, it has announced the introduction of Sensory Backpacks and Quiet Sessions, expanding its range of accessibility supports designed to enhance comfort, independence and enjoyment for visitors with additional needs. These new initiatives build on Titanic Belfast's continued investment in inclusion

infrastructure and visitor services in recent years - which has included Changing Places facilities, multimedia guides featuring British Sign Language and close working

relationships with a range of charities and organisations including Mencap and Orchardville.

The new Sensory Backpacks are available to borrow free of charge and aim to support neurodiverse guests and individuals who may benefit from additional sensory resources during their visit.

They have been designed primarily for children aged five - 12, although they are available to support any visitor who requires and have been thoughtfully themed around animals associated with Titanic. Each backpack contains a variety of items including ear defenders, sunglasses for brighter areas, emotions and senses cards, a range of fidget and sensory toys, drawing materials, smelling cubes with aromas



associated with Titanic, a visual contents list and a sensory trail.

In addition, Quiet Sessions have been launched to support visitors who may prefer reduced noise, softer

lighting and a more relaxed atmosphere. The sessions will give guests the opportunity to discover the Titanic Experience in a calm and sensory-friendly environment in an

inclusive way to explore the galleries at their own pace. Afternoon sessions will take place on Monday 26th January and Monday 23rd February and a morning session

is scheduled for Sunday 22nd February. For more on Titanic Belfast's accessibility information or to book a Quiet Session please go to www.titanicbelfast.com.

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Thompson Leisure: Driving Ireland's Motorhome Lifestyle Forward

Thompson Leisure has firmly established itself as Ireland's largest and most trusted motorhome and campervan dealer, setting the benchmark for quality, choice, and customer care.

For decades, the company has been at the heart of Ireland's growing touring and staycation culture, offering customers not just vehicles, but complete freedom to explore the open road.

With an extensive range of new and used motorhomes and campervans from leading European

brands, Thompson Leisure caters to every type of traveller, from first-time adventurers to seasoned touring enthusiasts. Backed by knowledgeable staff and a reputation built on reliability, customers can buy with confidence, knowing expert advice is always close at hand.

Thompson Leisure has a very successful rental department called TLL Rent. TLL Rent allows customers to experience the motorhome lifestyle without commitment, making it ideal for holidays, festivals, or trial runs before purchase. Fully equipped and meticulously



maintained, the rental fleet reflects the same high standards found across the business.

Beyond sales and rentals, Thompson Leisure offers comprehensive aftersales support. Its state-of-the-art workshop provides full habitation checks, mechanical servicing, repairs, and upgrades, ensuring motorhomes and campervans

remain safe, comfortable, and road-ready year-round. The company also offers secure outside storage, giving owners peace of mind when their vehicle is not in use. From purchase to aftercare, Thompson Leisure continues to lead the way, supporting Ireland's motorhome community every mile of the journey.

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E: reception.belfast@maldronhotels.com
W: maldronhotels.com

Equine Apprentice in the spotlight

Northern Ireland Apprenticeship Week (2-6 February) provided the perfect platform to shine the spotlight on a former Equine Apprentice, Jack Johnson.

At the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), staff take immense pride not only in his academic achievements but also in celebrating his determination to turn a lifelong passion for racing into a remarkable success story.

Rising talent Jack Johnson, from Belfast completed his Apprenticeship training whilst working with the highly respected Stuart Crawford Racing, Larne. During his time there, Jack completed both the Level 2 and Level 3 Apprenticeship in the Equine Industry training programmes. He attained his British Horse Society

Stage 2 Care and Ride and Stage 3 Care and Ride qualifications as part of the NI Apprenticeship Framework.

From a young age Jack developed an interest in horse racing through watching it on television. Taking his inspiration from jockeys including Ruby Walsh and AP McCoy his childhood ambition was to become a jockey. After a taste for horse riding at lessons at a local Equestrian Centre he was smitten.

Leaving school after Year 12 Jack secured an Apprenticeship training opportunity to develop his skills and competencies alongside his passion.

In the autumn of

2025, Jack fulfilled this goal, with his first Point-to-Point win at Loughanmore, Dunadry. Having witnessed his passion and drive for horses, Jack's Dad and Grandfather 'backed him' purchasing him a horse called 'Colvin'. What a wonderful investment! Jack was given the opportunity to race Colvin at Loughanmore, his second only race since achieving his Qualified Rider status, making the triumph an even more remarkable and memorable win. With no previous family connections to the equine industry this victory was extra special to Jack.

Reflecting Jack said:

"I attended the Award's Ceremony at CAFRE Enniskillen Campus on the Friday receiving my Level 3 Apprenticeship in The Equine Industry qualification and then won the race on the Saturday – what a weekend! Sharing the experiences with my Dad and Grandad, made it even more special. They've supported me every step of the way, and buying Colvin together was a real family effort. It's something we'll never forget."

For Jack his journey started after his GCSEs, when he decided to follow a career in the equine sector. With a clear determination to succeed and with the support of

his employer and guidance of others in the industry Jack has proved that if you have a passion, you should follow it.

If you are considering options after your GCSEs, get ahead with an Apprenticeship in the Equine Industry. Secure employment within the sector and study with CAFRE at Enniskillen Campus through periods of block release training.

Discover more! Book now to attend our Equine Open Day on Saturday 7 March 2026 at Enniskillen Campus. For further information on the Open Day, Apprenticeship training and Equine courses, please visit: www.cafre.ac.uk.



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SPOTLIGHT ON: Equestrian Waste Removal.com

Managing the "muckheap" is no longer just about finding a corner of the field or a sympathetic farmer to dump it. Between strict environmental regulations and the health risks posed by mismanaged manure, professional waste disposal has become a necessity for equestrians.

Enter Equestrian Waste Removals, Northern Ireland's premier specialist in equine waste management. Based in Dromara, the company has built a reputation for providing a clean, compliant, and highly convenient solution for everything from private stables to large-scale eventing centres.

More Than Just a Muckheap: The Benefits of Professional Removal

Protecting Horse Health Manure is a primary breeding ground for flies, worms, and parasites like strongyles.

By regularly removing waste from the site rather than letting it sit near grazing pastures, owners can significantly reduce the parasite burden on their horses. This leads to fewer instances of colic, diarrhea, and "ill thrift," ultimately saving on vet bills.

Environmental Compliance Current regulations in Northern Ireland are strict regarding "run-off." Manure heaps must be kept away from watercourses, wells, and springs to prevent pollution. Equestrian Waste Removals ensures that all collected waste is disposed of in full compliance with environmental laws, providing customers with the necessary documentation to prove their yard is meeting legal standards.

Yard Aesthetics and Convenience A sprawling, untidy muckheap is an eyesore and a magnet for pests like rats. The specialist

skip hire and pit emptying services offered by the company keep the yard looking professional and organized.

Equestrian Waste Removals offers two primary paths for waste management:

Skip Hire with a Difference: The company provides specialized skips designed specifically for equestrian use. As seen in their latest advertisements, these skips feature low-entry ramps, allowing users to wheel a barrow directly inside. This eliminates the back-breaking labor of lifting heavy manure over high skip walls.

Professional Pit Emptying: For yards that already have a permanent concrete pit, the company offers a rapid emptying service. Using specialized machinery, they can clear a "Before" mess into an "After" clean space in a fraction of the time it would take manually.

Equestrian Waste Removals are a frequent



sponsor of Eventing Ireland and Showjumping Ireland (SJI) events. By specializing

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ROUND UP OF EVENTING IRELAND NORTHERN REGION FIXTURES FOR 2026

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

Led by regional chair Georgia Stubington, the Northern Region remains a powerhouse of the sport, blending grassroots development with high-level competition. The year began at The Meadows Equestrian

Centre (MEC) in Lurgan with the Baileys Horse Feeds Flexi-Eventing Series. Running every Saturday from January 10th through February 21st, 2026, the series serves as the ultimate "springboard" for the main season.

This format allows riders to choose individual phases (Dressage, Show Jumping, or Cross-Country) to school their horses. The 2026 league has been bolstered by a £1,000 prize fund from Baileys Horse Feeds, with points awarded for both performance and consistency.

Following the conclusion of the Flexi-Eventing league in February, the Northern Region transitions to its affiliated "One Day Event" (ODE) calendar. While dates are subject

to final confirmation by Eventing Ireland, the 2026 schedule is expected to follow the traditional northern circuit:

The Expected Spring/Summer Calendar of events kicks off with the traditional "season opener" on the sandy dunes of Tyrella, Co. Down (March-April). In May the action traditionally moves to Maddybenny on the North Coast, known for its testing cross-country course. The NI Spring Festival Final (April 25-26) and major summer

ODEs will be hosted by Castle Irvine, Nercarne. In August Loughmore and Finvoy host high quality fixtures.

While the Northern Region keeps local riders busy, 2026 also features two major "Home Internationals" and championship events that Northern members frequently target:

FEI World Eventing Championships U25 (Millstreet): Takes place July 22-26, 2026, this inaugural event at the Green Glens Arena will bring global talent to

Irish shores.

FEI National Championships: Traditionally held in early September, the 2026 venue is anticipated to be announced shortly, with Killossery Lodge or Lisgarvan House being top contenders for this rotating fixture.

FEI Eventing Championships: Scheduled for August 21-24, 2026, at Tattersalls, this remains the pinnacle for young Northern Region riders coming through the Pony Club ranks.

HSI Appoints Debbie Byrne as Youth Eventing High Performance Manager

Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) has announced the appointment of Debbie Byrne as its new High Performance Youth Eventing Manager, reinforcing the organisation's ongoing commitment to excellence, athlete development and the long-term progression of Irish eventing.

The appointment comes as preparations continue for the Youth European Championships this summer.

Byrne brings a wealth of experience in eventing, youth performance pathways and championship competition. She returns to the role having previously served as High Performance Youth Eventing Manager from 2011 to 2018, during which time she successfully planned and delivered Ireland's Junior and Young Rider eventing programmes, overseeing strategy, preparation and performance at international level.

With a long-term vision extending towards the Brisbane Olympic Games in 2032, Byrne will focus

on developing Ireland's emerging eventing talent within a championship-focused performance model.

This approach is designed to equip athletes with the experience, professionalism and resilience required to succeed at senior international level.

In addition, Byrne will work closely with HSI's newly appointed Senior High Performance Eventing Manager in the lead-up to the inaugural FEI Eventing Under-25 World Championships, which will be hosted by Ireland at Millstreet, Co. Cork. The event represents a significant milestone for Irish eventing as the country hosts the first running of the new

championship.

A highly respected figure within the sport, Byrne has played a central role in championship preparation and performance delivery in recent years. Most notably, she led Ireland's teams at the 2025 FEI World Breeding Championships for Young Horses at Le Lion d'Angers, where Irish combinations achieved multiple medal successes. Her responsibilities included team coordination, athlete support and performance management at one of the sport's most demanding international competitions.

Speaking about her appointment, Byrne said she was delighted to return to the role at a pivotal time for Irish youth eventing. She highlighted the depth of talent coming through the Pony, Junior and Young Rider ranks and stressed the importance of preparing athletes in a structured, professional and supportive environment to ensure a smooth transition to senior competition.

Welcoming the appointment, Horse Sport Ireland Chief Executive Denis Duggan praised Byrne's leadership, experience and proven track record, noting that her return will have a positive and lasting impact on the next generation of Irish eventing athletes.



Coach and Coach Tutor, and her academic background as an Associate Lecturer in Sport Studies further strengthens her expertise in high-performance sport.

In her role, Byrne will oversee the strategic development of HSI's youth eventing programmes, working closely with athletes, coaches, parents, owners and support teams to deliver a transparent, welfare-led and performance-focused pathway.

Speaking about her appointment, Byrne said she was delighted to return to the role at a pivotal time for Irish youth eventing. She highlighted the depth of talent coming through the Pony, Junior and Young Rider ranks and stressed the importance of preparing athletes in a structured, professional and supportive environment to ensure a smooth transition to senior competition.

A former international eventer, Byrne represented Ireland at Junior and Young Rider level and competed up to 4* level. She is a Horse Sport Ireland Level Three



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Treo Eile Announces New Partnership with Show Jumping Ireland – Supporting Thoroughbreds with Sports Membership Costs for 2026

Treo Eile is delighted to announce a new partnership with Show Jumping Ireland (SJI) for the 2026 season that brings real benefits for owners and riders of Thoroughbred horses.

As part of this exciting collaboration, Treo Eile will fully cover the cost of the SJI Sports Membership Package and Horse Registrations for any Thoroughbred registered with Treo Eile for the 2026 season, helping to remove a barrier to entry and encourage greater participation in the Irish showjumping community.

What is the SJI Sports Membership Package?

The Show Jumping Ireland Sports Membership Package is designed for adult riders/owners (over 18 years old on 1st January 2026) and one horse. It allows the registered horse and rider combination to compete in SJI-affiliated showjumping competitions up to and including 1.00 m in height, making it an ideal entry-level membership for riders progressing into affiliated sport or focusing on grassroots competitions.

This membership offers riders access to:

- Competing in SJI-registered shows up to 1.00 m
- Earning points and rankings within the SJI structure

• Being part of the official showjumping community with recognised competition status

• Eligibility to compete in specific leagues and finals open to Sports Members

Horse Registrations

Treo Eile are also covering the cost of a Horse Registration with Show Jumping Ireland for the 2026 season. This includes all Grades of horses once they are registered with Treo Eile.

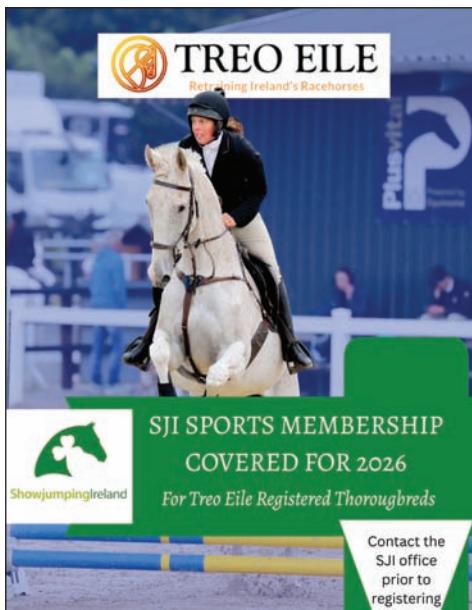
How to Claim Your Covered Membership

To ensure your Sports Membership cost is covered by Treo Eile, there are two simple steps:

1. Contact Anna at the Show Jumping Ireland office before you submit your SJI registration. This allows SJI to validate that your horse is Thoroughbred and registered with Treo Eile.

2. Once verified, SJI will process your Sports Membership Package (€100) with the cost covered by Treo Eile. Verification prior to registration is essential so that Treo Eile funding can be applied correctly.

Supporting



Thoroughbreds in Second Careers

showjumping and help grow the presence of ex-racehorses in the sport.

This initiative continues Treo Eile's mission of supporting the retraining, competing, and showcasing of Thoroughbreds across Ireland. By removing the financial barrier of the SJI Sports Membership, we're encouraging owners to take the next step into affiliated

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LA28 IS CALLING: THE ROAD TO OLYMPIC EQUESTRIAN GLORY

The countdown to the Los Angeles 2028 Olympic Games has officially begun, and for equestrian sport, the excitement is already building.

LA28 promises a spectacular stage for Dressage, Eventing and

Jumping, combining world-class sport with the unique energy and glamour of

California. For athletes, fans and supporters alike, the journey to LA has started — and now is the time to be part of it.

Registration for the LA28 Olympic ticket draw is now open, giving spectators the chance to secure seats at one of the most anticipated Games in recent history. Creating a profile through the LA28 website is the first step, ensuring fans are ready when ticket opportunities are released. Those keen to stay informed can also sign up for the official LA28 newsletter, which will provide regular updates as plans, venues and schedules continue to take shape.

Equestrian sport will once again take centre stage at the Olympics, with Eventing set to make an early impact. The Eventing competition will begin on the very first day of the Games, 14 July, and conclude on 18 July 2028, placing this thrilling three-phase discipline firmly in the spotlight from the outset. Known as the ultimate test of horse and rider, Eventing blends the precision of Dressage, the bravery and endurance of cross-country, and the accuracy of show jumping — demanding trust, athleticism and partnership at the highest level.

Alongside Eventing, Dressage and Jumping will showcase the full breadth of equestrian excellence. Dressage highlights harmony, balance and years of meticulous training, while Jumping delivers edge-of-the-seat drama as riders and horses tackle courses with obstacles rising to 1.60 metres, where a single rail can change the outcome in seconds.

Equestrian sport holds a unique place in Olympic history. A fixture of the Games since the early 1900s, it remains the only Olympic sport to involve animals and the only discipline in which men and women compete directly against one another on equal



terms, under the same rules. This tradition of equality, partnership and respect for the horse lies at the heart of Olympic equestrianism.

As LA28 approaches, anticipation continues to grow. For athletes dreaming of Olympic success and fans eager to witness history in the making, the message is clear: LA28 is calling — and the road to Olympic equestrian glory has truly begun.

Olympic Medallist Sam Griffiths Appointed Ireland's New High Performance Eventing Manager

Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) has announced the appointment of Olympic medallist Sam Griffiths as its new High Performance Eventing Manager, as preparations

Widely regarded as one of the most respected figures in international eventing, Griffiths brings exceptional experience as an elite athlete, coach and high-performance leader. A dual

Olympian for Australia, he was a member of the bronze medal-winning team at the Rio Olympic Games in 2016 and enjoyed a distinguished competitive career at the highest level of the sport.

A former Badminton Horse Trials champion, Griffiths represented

Australia at World Championships and five-star events worldwide, achieving a top-10 ranking on the FEI world rankings and being named the International Riders Club Eventing Rider of the Year in 2014.

Beyond his achievements in the saddle, Griffiths

has established a strong reputation in high-performance programme leadership. He has held senior roles within elite eventing structures, contributing to the redesign of New Zealand's High Performance Eventing Programme alongside the High Performance Director. He also served as Head Coach of New Zealand's High Performance Eventing Team for more than three years, including at the Paris Olympic Games in 2024, and has acted as Chef d'Equipe at Nations Cups and major international events.

Griffiths expressed his enthusiasm for the role,

highlighting Ireland's growing strength in eventing and the depth of talent



coming through. He noted that recent championship performances have demonstrated Ireland's upward trajectory and said his ambition is to help guide the programme towards consistent podium contention, with Olympic success firmly in sight.

He also has strong personal connections to Ireland, having won Badminton with the

Irish-bred mare Paulank Brockagh, bred in Co. Wicklow by Paula and Frank Cullen. Griffiths has family in South Dublin and a long-standing relationship with Horse Sport Ireland sponsors TRM, further strengthening his ties to Irish equestrian sport.

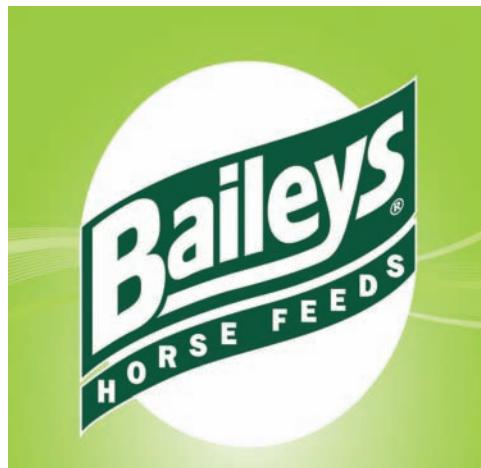
Griffiths is also recognised internationally for his advocacy of horse welfare, athlete accountability and transparency, contributing thoughtfully to discussions aimed at strengthening integrity within high-performance sport.

Welcoming the appointment, Horse Sport Ireland Chief Executive Denis Duggan praised Griffiths' blend of elite competitive experience and leadership expertise, noting that his vision, values and commitment to welfare will play a key role in advancing Ireland's high-performance eventing programme.

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Eventing IRELAND

Countryside Services Limited awarded training and facilitation contract

Countryside Services Limited has been appointed to deliver key knowledge transfer elements of the Farming for Sustainability Scheme.

Countryside Services will support the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), delivering face to face training and themed peer to peer group facilitation to farm businesses across Northern Ireland.

"The appointment of Countryside Services will help ensure farmers have timely, practical and accessible training that supports productivity, environmental outcomes and resilience across the sector," commented Albert Johnston, Head of Knowledge Advisory Service, CAFRE.

The first training to be delivered by Countryside Services will be associated



Dr Steven Johnston and Albert Johnston, CAFRE discuss Farming for Sustainability Scheme training programmes with Dr Andrew Kerr and Philip Cargill from Countryside Services Limited ahead of the launch of new dates for Soil Nutrient Health Scheme Training events.

"We're delighted to partner with CAFRE in delivering high quality training and facilitated peer learning

Kerr, Countryside Services Limited. If you would like further information on relating to the Sustainable Agriculture Programme, please visit the Business Support area of: www.cafre.ac.uk/snhs-training

to support farm businesses increase both efficiency and care for our environment," remarked Dr Andrew



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Draft Strategy to protect nature for future generations

Members of the public are to be consulted on a draft Nature Recovery Strategy to restore, manage and protect Northern Ireland's habitats for future generations.

DAERA Minister Andrew Muir launched a public consultation today on the draft strategy, which sets out how the department will meet international and national ambitions on biodiversity up to 2032.

Nature is in decline across the world, including Northern Ireland, where many habitats and species are under threat with 40% of the flora and fauna in our most protected sites falling short of 'favourable condition' standards.

Only one of 49 priority habitat types here are considered to be at favourable conservation status (fourth UK Habitats Directive Report), while one in nine (12%) of Northern Ireland species are currently threatened with extinction (State of Nature 2023).

The draft Nature Recovery Strategy contains five strategic objectives and clear

actions to help deliver transformation across government, business and society to safeguard and restore nature and biodiversity. This includes actions that have already been agreed or are in development in existing strategies and policies, as well as additional new actions that have been identified to further promote nature restoration.

The proposed additional actions for 2026 include:

- Publishing a Tree Planting Action Plan
- Development of a new All-Ireland Pollinator Plan for 2026-30
- Development of a Protected Sites Delivery Plan
- Publishing a Plastic Pollution Plan
- Launching a Public Consultation on Northern Ireland's first Clean Air Strategy
- Publishing the report on latest Northern Ireland Countryside Survey (2022-2025)



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'FIELD TO FORK' PROGRAMME

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

The pilot scheme has now officially launched and is already being delivered in local classrooms, with visits completed at Comber, Kilcooley and Carrodore Primary Schools. Pupils have been taking part in hands-on activities that bring the journey of food from field to plate to life, exploring growing conditions, soil health, climate and environmental impact while making clear

links between science and the food they eat every day.

Delivered by W5's expert Learning and Engagement team and sponsored by Mash Direct, the free programme engages pupils from ten local primary schools, particularly in areas of higher social deprivation. The sessions are curriculum-linked, hands-on, and designed to spark curiosity and highlight the

journey from farm to plate. The pilot includes practical activities such as:

- Growing vegetables from seed and observing how soil and climate affect growth
- Cooking and tasting traditional potato bread
- Exploring balanced nutrition with the Eatwell Plate
- Investigating food miles and sustainable farming practices
- Creating video stories

to share learnings

Research underscores the importance of initiatives like this. According to the British Nutrition Foundation (BNF), nearly one in five primary-school children believe fish fingers come from chicken, and close to a third think cheese comes from plants - highlighting a widespread lack of understanding of food origins. Meanwhile, the Agriculture and Horticulture Development

Board (AHDB) reports that after using its "Food - a fact of life" resources, 85% of pupils were more informed about where food comes from.

As a pilot scheme, this initiative is sowing the seeds for a broader educational rollout, one that could transform how young people understand food, health and sustainability from the field all the way to their fork.



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

Minister Muir celebrates £7.91 million investment in rural areas

DAERA Minister Andrew Muir has welcomed the award of £7.91million in grants to over 2,350 rural community organisations and businesses over the past year.

The awards have been made through the Department's Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme and Rural Business Development Grant Scheme.

Minister Muir was speaking during a visit to Moneyslane Rural

Community Organisation, the recipient of a grant totalling £1,491 from the Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme in 2025/2026 to modernise their Community Hub.

Minister Muir said: "I am delighted that 1,048

Letters of Offer for funding of £1.74million have been issued to voluntary and community organisations throughout Northern Ireland from the Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme.

"The Scheme is a key initiative delivered through my Department's Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework. It supports rural community-led, voluntary organisations in identifying and implementing projects that address locally identified poverty, isolation, loneliness and health and wellbeing issues.

"I was delighted to hear how Moneyslane Rural Community organisation have availed of the Department's Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme over many years to enhance

their facilities for the local rural community. I express my sincere gratitude to the committee and to all voluntary and community organisations across Northern Ireland for their ongoing work in maintaining and developing a wide range of opportunities and facilities for people in local rural communities."

Minister Muir also visited BWE Equestrian Ltd, a rural micro-business in Ballyward, where he presented their Letter of Offer of £5,850 from the Rural Business Development Grant Scheme to enable the purchase of a 'Shockwave' linear soil decompaction machine.

Minister Muir said: "I want to take this opportunity to highlight the significant investment of £6.17million,



Minister Andrew Muir pictured with Newry Mourne and Down Council Chair Cllr Philip Campbell, Shane O'Reilly, Manager of Ballyward Equestrian Estate and Ceto a six-year-old mare bred at Ballyward.

also from my Department's Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework, to 1,310 rural businesses through the Rural Business Development Grant Scheme."

He added: "It's been great to meet the staff of BWE Equestrian Limited, a first-time applicant to the Scheme, and to hear how the grant will help their business's sustainability and increase their potential for growth. This is exactly the type of support the scheme aims to deliver across Northern Ireland."

The Minister concluded:

"Both the Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme and the Rural Business Development Grant Scheme are important contributors to my commitment to build strong, sustainable and diverse rural communities where people want to live, work and invest."



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DRIVERS PLAGUED BY CRUMBLING ROADS

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

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

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

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

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

Although around two thirds (67%) of all reported potholes were fixed last year, the repair rate varied wildly between council areas – with Fermanagh and Omagh tackling 87% of defects compared to 44% in Belfast.

Overall, Belfast emerged as the area with the highest number of reported potholes, with 16,856 in 2025 – a significant rise of 38% from the previous year.

Newry, Mourne and Down was the next hardest hit area at 15,249, followed by Mid Ulster, which recorded 12,683 potholes.



While four of the 11 local council areas saw an increase in potholes year-on-year, the majority experienced a decrease. Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon enjoyed the biggest year-on-year drop of 35%, while Lisburn and Castlereagh recorded the fewest potholes overall at 3980.

Potholes are a consistent bugbear for motorists, with a CompareNI survey finding that 91% of drivers here have issues with potholes in their area, with 96% of respondents saying

they weren't being fixed quickly enough.

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

While potholes can sometimes be an unavoidable part of driving, there are some preventative measures drivers can take to help reduce the risk of damage, such as regularly maintaining tyre pressure, being wary of puddles and checking navigation apps for problem

areas.

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

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

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LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR A BRILLIANT SPRING

To the untrained eye, the February garden looks dormant, perhaps even bleak. However, for a gardener, this month is the "Quiet Work" phase.

The tasks you complete now—while the sap is still low and the pests are mostly asleep—will determine the health and yield of your garden for the rest of the year.

Here is your practical guide to essential February garden maintenance.

Structural Pruning: The "3 D's"

February is the prime time for "dormant pruning." Because deciduous trees and shrubs have no leaves, you can clearly see the structure of the plant and address issues before the spring growth spurt.

• The 3 D's: Inspect your trees and shrubs

for anything Dead, Damaged, or Diseased. Removing these prevents rot from spreading.

• Wisteria and Roses: Late February is the deadline for pruning bush roses and thinning out wisteria side-shoots (cut back to 2–3 buds) to encourage massive blooms in May.

• Fruit Trees: Prune apples and pears to create an "open goblet" shape. This allows light and air to reach the center of the tree, reducing the risk of fungal infections.

Note: Avoid pruning "stone fruits" (plums, cherries) in February, as they are susceptible

to Silver Leaf disease if cut in winter.

Soil Preparation and "The Mulch Move"

Good gardening starts from the ground up. If the soil isn't frozen or waterlogged, you can begin the vital work of feeding the earth.

• Suppression Mulching: Spread a thick layer (2–3 inches) of compost or well-rotted manure over your flower beds. Do not dig it in; let the earthworms do the work for you. This smothers early weed seeds and locks in moisture.

• Vegetable Bed Prep: If you use "no-dig" methods, lay down

cardboard and fresh compost now. If you have heavy clay soil, a light turn of the soil in February allows the remaining frosts to break up the clods into a fine tilth.

Hardscape and Tool Hygiene

Before the "Spring Rush" hits and every Saturday becomes a race against the clock, get your infrastructure in order.

• Power Wash the Slippery Bits: Algae grows aggressively in damp winter weather. Clean your patios, decks, and walkways now to prevent slip hazards.

• The Tool Tune-Up: * Sanitize: Wash

your pots and seed trays with a mild bleach solution to kill lingering pathogens.

• Sharpen: Use a whetstone on your hoes and spades. A sharp spade cuts through soil with half the effort.

• Oil: Rub linseed oil into wooden tool handles to prevent splintering.

Early Sowing and "Chitting"

While the ground is too cold for most seeds, you can start the clock indoors or in a greenhouse.

• Chitting Potatoes: Place seed potatoes in egg cartons in a cool, bright, frost-free room. They will grow "chits" (sturdy green sprouts),



which gives them a head start when you plant them in March or April.

• Sweet Peas: Start

these indoors now. They love a long growing season to develop deep roots.

• Hardy Veggies:

If you have a bright windowsill or a heated propagator, you can start sowing onions, leeks, and hardy salads.

NIFRS Reveals Highest House Fire Fatalities in 25

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

The statistics from Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service (NIFRS) reveal that half of the incidents were smoking material

related with electrical causes contributing to 4 fatalities. A third of the incidents did not have working smoke alarms.

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

NIFRS is urging the public to start the year by taking extra care at home with their safety habits. Most fires are preventable and having working smoke alarms

and changing behaviours that create risk can save your life.

NIFRS Assistant Chief Fire & Rescue Officer Marcus Wright said:

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

emergencies leading to devastating impacts for our community.

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

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

cigarettes before placing them in a suitable container, such as a metal bin.

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

"As we continue to be in the high-risk time of year for house fire, we are asking you to take time to reach out to vulnerable family members, neighbours and friends who may need support to stay safe from fire, especially those who live alone. We would also advise heat detectors in your kitchen and utility.

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

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

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COLD SNAPS CAUSING BURST PIPES

– CHECK YOUR PROPERTY URGES NI

WATER

Since the beginning of January, a series of cold snaps have led to a considerable rise in burst pipes across the NI Water network and on private property.

While the NI Water teams are out finding and repairing bursts on the network, the public can help by checking for leaks on their property.

If you spot a leak on your property, turn off the water supply using your stop valve (usually under the kitchen sink) to minimise any damage. If you spot a leak or burst pipe on the public system - such as on streets, pavements, or public spaces - please report it to us.

Paul Bryce, Head of Water at NI Water, said: "NI Water is asking the

public to be proactive; if you discover a leak, repair it if it's on your property or report it to NI Water if it's on the public network. We are also asking farmers, caravan owners and landlords to inspect empty buildings, drinking troughs, sheds, yards, taps, and outhouses - any location with water supplies. Keep an eye on your water meter, as this can indicate a burst; quick repairs can help prevent unnecessary high water bills."

How to Report a Leak



or Burst Pipe:

If you spot a burst pipe or leak on the road

or street, please report it to NI Water straight away. Reporting is

quick and easy:

- Fill in the online form at www.niwater.com/report-a-leak-or-burst-pipe
- Contact Leakline

on 0800 0282011 (free, open 24/7)

- Use NI Water's webchat service or reach out via NI Water's social media channels

What to Do If You Have a Leak or Burst Pipe:

- Turn off your stop valve (usually under the kitchen sink, turn clockwise).

- Use towels or thick cloths to block escaping water.

- Turn on all taps to lower water pressure and reduce flooding; make sure to turn them off once the problem is fixed.

- Contact a plumber
- find an accredited professional by searching your postcode at www.watersafe.org.uk.

- Notify your insurance company to check for protection against water damage.

With further cold snaps possible throughout the winter months, NI Water is also urging the public to protect their outdoor taps from freezing and costly damage caused by leaks and bursts by fitting a free insulated tap cover, available at www.getwaterfit.co.uk while stocks last.

Essential February Home Maintenance

February is often considered a "limbo" month—too late for holiday decorating and too early for major landscaping.

However, for a savvy homeowner, this is the most strategic time of year to focus on the interior health of your property. By tackling these indoor tasks now, you free up your schedule for the outdoor demands of spring.

Optimize Your Indoor Air Quality

Since windows remain shut against the winter chill, your home's air circulation is under heavy load. February is the ideal time to service the "lungs" of your house.

- Replace HVAC Filters: Dust and allergens accumulate rapidly during peak heating months. A fresh filter improves air quality and prevents your furnace from overworking.¹

- Clean Refrigerator Coils: Dust buildup on the coils at the back or bottom of your fridge forces the compressor to run longer.² Use a vacuum attachment or a coil brush to clear it away;

this simple act can extend the life of your appliance by years.³

- Dust Ceiling Fan Blades: Before you flip the direction of your fans for the warmer months, wipe down the blades to prevent a "dust shower" when they start spinning at higher speeds.

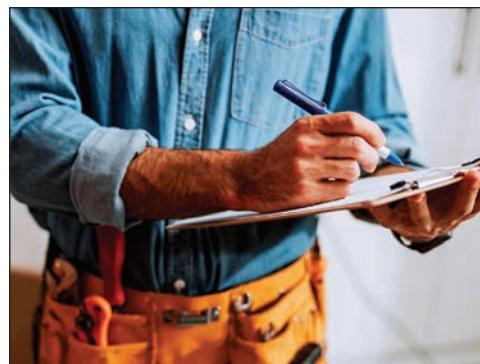
The "Safety First" Audit

With more time spent indoors, ensuring your home's safety systems are functional is paramount. Use the mid-month mark as your annual reminder.

- Test Detectors: Check smoke and carbon monoxide detectors. If you haven't replaced the batteries in the last six months, do it now regardless of whether they "chirp."

- Clear the Dryer Vent: Lint buildup is a leading cause of household fires.⁴ Disconnect the duct from the back of the dryer and vacuum out the accumulated debris.

- Check Fire Extinguishers: Ensure the pressure gauge is in



the green zone and that the extinguisher is easily accessible, not buried at the back of a pantry.

Kitchen and Bath "Mini-Refreshes"

Low humidity in February makes it a great time for minor sealing and deep-cleaning projects that require dry air to cure.

- Gear Up for Spring

February is the "planning phase." Preparation now prevents frustration when the first warm weekend arrives.

- Sharpen Garden Tools: Take your lawnmower blades,

pruners, and shears to be sharpened. Local hardware stores are usually quiet this month and can offer a faster turnaround.

- Inspect Sump Pump: If you live in a rural property, pour a bucket of water into your sump pit to ensure the pump activates and clears the water effectively.

- Drain the Water Heater: Flushing out sediment from the bottom of your tank improves heating efficiency and prevents the "knocking" sounds caused by mineral buildup.

Audit your home security

As the winter chill lingers many homeowners fall into a "hibernation" mindset, often overlooking the unique security vulnerabilities that come with late winter. February is an essential time to audit your home's defenses.

Here is a comprehensive guide to securing your home and property during the shortest month of the year.

Eliminate "The Darkness Advantage"

Criminals rely on the cover of darkness to scout properties.

- Audit Your Lighting: Walk around your property at 6:00 PM. Are there blind spots? Install motion-activated LED floodlights near entry points.

- Smart Timers: If you aren't home until after dark, use smart plugs to turn on interior lamps.

A dark house for three hours every evening is a clear signal that no one is home.

- Manage Your "Digital Footprint"

February is a popular month for mid-winter vacations or "sun-seeking" trips.²

- Reinforce Sliders: Sliding glass doors are notoriously easy to pop off their tracks. Place a security bar (or "charlie bar") in the track to prevent it from being forced open.

- Fortify Entry Points Against "Winter Wear"

Manage Your "Digital Footprint"

February is a popular month for mid-winter vacations or "sun-seeking" trips.²

- Clear the Path: Trim any overgrown evergreens or shrubs that provide a "hiding spot" near windows or doors.

- Reinforce Sliders: Sliding glass doors are notoriously easy to pop off their tracks. Place a security bar (or "charlie bar") in the track to prevent it from being forced open.

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