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

DEMENTIA NI MEMBERS DRIVE DEVELOPMENT OF SENSORY GARDEN

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

In late 2024, Ards and North Down Borough Council approached Dementia NI members in Bangor to provide feedback and guidance as to how its planned dementia-friendly garden should be designed. Council

representatives and the garden designers visited the organisation's Bangor group and discussed possible layouts, materials, seating styles and more, with samples to review and the opportunity for

input and feedback.

The Dementia NI members, all of whom are living with a diagnosis of dementia, provided vital intel to the process, heavily influencing the design of the garden and

resulting in a well-rounded and holistic space providing a treat for all the senses in a safe and enclosed garden environment.

**Continued on
page 4**

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Successful 'Taster Tours' Programme

Ards and North Down Borough Council, in partnership with South Eastern Regional College (SERC), is celebrating the success of its 'Taster Tours' initiative, which ran from July to October 2025.

The programme, delivered by the latest ONC Level 2 Tour Guiding graduates, gave residents and visitors a unique opportunity to explore the region's rich history, heritage, and natural beauty through the eyes of passionate local guides.

Over the course of the summer and early autumn, participants enjoyed themed tours, each offering a distinctive perspective on the area's cultural and historical treasures.

Programme highlights included explorations of the Victorian elegance of the award-winning Bangor Castle Walled

Garden, uncovering floral secrets and timeless charm, reflective journeys from the Walled Garden to Bangor Abbey combined mindfulness with local heritage, coastal walks along Portavo and Orlock revealed myths and maritime history, while stories of three influential women at The Old Market House brought Bangor's past to life.

Ticket proceeds were donated to the Mayor of Ards and North Down, Councillor Gillian McCollum's chosen charities for 2025: St Vincent De Paul, Women's Aid, and Orchardville.

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2025 Ards and North Down Sports Awards

Nominations are now open for the 2025 Ards and North Down Sports Awards, celebrating outstanding sporting achievements across the Borough.

The official launch of the 2025 Awards took place recently at the Clondeboy Lodge Hotel, Bangor, hosted by Denise Watson (U105). The event welcomed the Mayor of Ards and North Down, sponsors, members of the Sports Forum working group, special guests and some of last year's winners.

The Awards aim to recognise, promote and reward local sporting excellence, highlighting the dedication of athletes, teams, coaches, and volunteers who make a difference in our community.

The Mayor of Ards and North Down, Councillor Gillian McCollum, said:

"Sport plays a vital role in our community, bringing people together and inspiring future generations. These awards are an opportunity to celebrate the incredible talent and commitment we see across the Borough every day. I encourage everyone to get involved and nominate those who make a real difference in local sport."

We are inviting sports clubs, schools, governing



bodies, individuals, and members of the public to nominate their sporting stars in one or more of the following ten categories:

- Sports Person of the Year - Sponsored by Mervyn Stewart, North Down MG
- Sports Person of the Year U18 - Sponsored by Prestige Trophies
- Sports Person of the Year U15 - Sponsored by Exploris
- Sports Team of the Year - Sponsored by Progressive Building Society
- U18 Junior Sports Team

of the Year - Sponsored by Newtownards Saturday Market Traders

- U15 Junior Sports Team of the Year - Sponsored by Ards Suicide Awareness Group
- Sports Coach of the Year - Sponsored by The Echlinville Distillery
- Volunteer of the Year - In memory of Alderman Menagh
- Lifetime Service Recognition - Sponsored by Ards and North Down Sports Forum
- Wall of Fame Inductee - Sponsored by the Mayor of

Ards and North Down Nomination forms and criteria can be found at - Ards and North Down Sports Awards | AND Leisure

Nominations will close 12noon on Monday 12th January 2026.

The Awards Ceremony will take place on Friday 13 March 2026 at the Clondeboy Lodge Hotel, Bangor.

For further information, please contact the Sports Development team at: sportsawards@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk

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Grace is at the Top of her Game in UK Culinary Competition

Massive congratulations to SERC Higher Level Apprentice in Culinary Arts, Grace Dugan, who has won the UK-wide Eat Wild Young Chef Competition, held in London recently.

Eat Wild promotes the use of wild game in cooking and hosted the contest in collaboration with the Craft Guild of Chefs. Grace impressed the judges with her venison hotdog with smoked venison heart, and pheasant with lentils. She has won a handcrafted, cast-iron pan, a clay pigeon shooting lesson, and a day in the kitchen

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Grace Dugan

with Mark Kempson of Michelin-starred Kitchen W8 in London, followed by dinner for four people. Mark Kempson is an advocate for cooking with wild food and the connection to nature that this brings. Grace Dugan was competing against five other young chefs from around the UK. All six finalists were awarded a three-year

membership of the Craft Guild of Chefs, alongside a chef's jacket and an Eat Wild apron. Grace, who is 20 and from Belfast, is employed by The Culloden Hotel and has been studying at SERC Bangor Campus for four years, since starting on a Level 3 Diploma in Professional Cookery. Chef Mark Kempson, announcing the result, commented that there was nothing he would change in Grace's dishes, and said he hoped she would be able to take up her prize and join him in his restaurant for a day very soon.

Continued from page 1

Whether from the pathway, which Dementia NI members stipulated should be a consistent size, shape and colour and on a loop, to the comfortable and well-spaced-out seating

throughout the garden, the feedback and first-hand experiences were invaluable to the designers and the Council as the designs took shape.

The members of Dementia NI suggested the planting should have attributes that will be evident throughout the year, whether

shape, size, texture or scent, to allow for any visitors who may be neurodivergent, hard of hearing, partially sighted or other issues to appreciate and benefit from the carefully considered trees, shrubs and plants.

The introduction of a water feature was also a popular suggestion


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FINDING STRENGTH AND HOPE AFTER A LIFE-CHANGING BRAIN TUMOUR DIAGNOSIS

A Donaghadee woman is sharing her powerful and emotional journey following a brain tumour diagnosis In July 2022 to raise awareness during International Brain Tumour Awareness Week

In July 2022, Linda Geddis's life changed dramatically after what she thought was a simple case of vertigo turned out to be a brain tumour. "I went to the doctor thinking I had vertigo," Linda explained. "It was a Locum Doctor I had at the time and she said to confirm everything, she would send me for a CT scan. The CT scan showed up the tumour in my brain."

Linda was referred immediately to the Royal Victoria Hospital for an MRI scan, where the tumour was confirmed. "I was referred on for surgery in the Royal a few weeks later and after that, I stayed in the Brain Rehabilitation Unit in Musgrave Park Hospital for a number of months."

Following five months of hospital care, Linda was referred to the Community Brain Injury Team in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, who supported her recovery journey at home.

Reflecting on the shock of her diagnosis, Linda said, "I think I was totally oblivious to what was actually happening. I probably was very naïve and just went in thinking, right, two weeks in hospital, six months' recovery and I would be back at work, it would be fine."

"But it just was not that way at all. It was a long, long journey. In fact, it is still ongoing. I do not really dwell too much on what could have been if I had not had that diagnosis. I am just so lucky the tumour was caught and treated."

Doctors told Linda that her tumour had likely been present for around two years before it was detected. "I had no other symptoms apart from dizzy spells a few weeks before my CT scan. I just knew I did not feel right and that is what I told the Doctor. I never go to the Doctor for anything, so she knew something was not right."



Linda credits the Community Brain Injury Team for helping her rebuild her life. "They helped me move back home safely and supported me in doing everyday tasks. They also put me in touch with support groups and others who had gone through something similar. "A lot of what the Brain Injury Team teach you is about acceptance.

Accepting what has happened, learning to adapt and realising that there is still life after." Now, Linda wants to encourage others to listen to their bodies and seek medical advice if something feels wrong. "It is so important to raise awareness. You know your own body, if you know you are not right, seek advice and ask questions."

among Dementia NI members, allowing for a calming element with the flow of water, it also provides a fun place for children – of all ages – to play on sunnier days. Rodney James, a member of Dementia NI from Comber, and part of the joint Bangor-Newtownards group, officially cut the ribbon and opened the garden at a special event in August, while Raymond Crawford, another Dementia NI member, from Millisle, was interviewed by BBC Radio Ulster's Gardeners' Corner

in October about the organisation's involvement in the consultation process. Dementia NI is a local charity working to drive positive change for those living with a diagnosis of dementia throughout Northern Ireland. The charity operates 16 Empowerment Groups across all the Health Trust areas, providing vital peer support, information and signposting for its members. For more information on its life changing work, visit www.dementiani.org



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GIFT VOUCHERS AVAILABLE

Alliance meets Bangor Central Eco-Council and New Principal.

North Down Alliance MLAs Andrew Muir and Connie Egan have praised the Eco-Council at Bangor Central Integrated Primary School after a recent visit.



L-R) Andrew Muir MLA, Principal Richard Lawther and Connie Egan MLA outside Bangor Central Integrated Primary School.

The two local representatives took questions from the students and also met with the new principal Mr Richard Lawther, discussing issues such as the need for progress on the long-overdue new school building.

"I am always in awe of young people's knowledge and passion for our environment when I visit our local primary schools, and Bangor Central is no exception. Connie and I were quizzed on

everything from Lough Neagh and Climate Change," said Andrew Muir MLA.

"The pupils on the Eco-Committee are exploring how their school can encourage biodiversity, for example, putting up bird feeders. They are also looking at how they can make healthier choices that benefit our planet and how their school can be more energy efficient. I was delighted to hear the school has been given the Eco-School's Green

Flag Award for their efforts. All the pupils are deserving champions of our environment."

Connie Egan MLA has said, "Andrew and I were pleased to engage with the new Principal of Bangor Central Integrated Primary School, Mr Richard Lawther, as he settles into his role. We discussed a number of topics, including the school's plan for a new building, road safety and supporting pupils with Special Educational Needs.

"The school is hopeful that their new build will progress next year. I will be seeking further assurances from the Education Minister that the project will break ground in early 2026. Bangor Central is going above and beyond to support pupils from all backgrounds, and of all abilities. They deserve to have facilities that are modern, fit for purpose and designed to meet the needs of pupils, staff and the wider school community."

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

The lunch, hosted by Ards and North Down Mayor, Councillor Gillian McCollum, offered an intimate setting for Melanie

to share her powerful story of resilience and self-acceptance.

Melanie, a burn survivor whose striking image captured national attention, spoke candidly about her journey of overcoming adversity and embracing confidence. Her openness sparked meaningful conversations among attendees, who described the experience as “deeply moving” and “a reminder of the strength within us all.”

The event aimed to empower young people by showing that beauty and courage come in many forms. Participants asked engaging questions, gaining insights into Melanie’s personal

challenges and triumphs, and left with renewed motivation to face their own obstacles.

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

The Mayor of Ards and North Down, Councillor Gillian McCollum, said:

“We are indebted to Melanie for sharing her time so generously. I have known Mel for many years and



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

sharing our truths.” The Taylor Wessing Photo Portrait Prize is one of the most prestigious photography awards in the world,

celebrating outstanding portraiture. Melanie’s image, praised for its honesty and emotional depth, has become a symbol of strength and authenticity.

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The ‘Embrace’ Winter/Spring Talks are Back in Bangor!

St Andrew’s Presbyterian Church is throwing open its doors for a fantastic series of talks this winter and spring, starting January 15th.

The Embrace group, which is all about connecting people in the community, has put together a great list of inspiring speakers and topics for the series.

Kicking things off with Rev Elliot Swatridge, minister at Groomsport Parish Church. He’s going to share his personal Christian journey—how

he went from reading a Gideon’s Bible at school to becoming a minister.

Lady Sylvia Hermon, the former MP for North Down, who will talk about her experiences in politics and how her faith has helped her along the way.

Get ready for some music and inspiration in March! Melanie Doug-

las, a singer-songwriter and former nurse, will tell her story through song and testimony. In April, Colin Dickson will shine a light on the crucial work of International Meeting Point in Belfast, helping immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees settle in. The series wraps up in May with Lynda Graham, a professional counsellor, who will explore the important link between mindfulness and mental health.

Here’s the quick schedule:

- January 15th: Rev Elliott Swatridge
- February 19th: Lady Sylvia Hermon
- March 19th: Melanie Douglas
- April 16th: Colin

Dickson

- May 21st: Lynda Graham

Every meeting kicks off with refreshments at 2:30 pm. It’s a super relaxed way to meet new people and have a good chat. The talks themselves are informal, so please feel free to ask questions! Everyone is welcome, and you don’t need to book a spot—just turn up!

Quick Details:

- When: The third Thursday of each month (Jan–May for this series)
- Time: 2:30 pm
- Where: St Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Bangor
- Need more info? Just call at the church to obtain a programme for further details.



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Audiobook Adventure for Luke

One of the best things about the internet - and no doubt something that world wide web inventor Sir Tim Berners-Lee is probably proud of – is that you can teach yourself to do something new.

Such is the case for SERC student, Luke Dowling, who had an idea for an audio book, and rather than waiting for someone to teach him how to put something together, he just got on with it.

Luke (17) from Bangor, has just launched the fourth instalment in his audio drama called Paradox: Tales from Hell,, which has involved Luke working with people from all over the world. Luke said, “I have been working on the audiobook for about a year now. It’s entirely unfunded and all the people who are involved – illustrators, voice actors, composers - work on it solely for the experience.”

Explaining how the audio book came about Luke said, “I had the idea of doing something like this since I was 14 years old. I had two previous attempts of pulling it together, but it never quite worked out, so there has been a bit of trial and error.

“I used a website called Casting Call Club and put my idea up as a project. About



700 people from across the world applied to take part and after hosting auditions for the different roles (yes, 700), we have ended up with a 70-strong team – people from New Zealand, Tokyo, United States and Australia - involved in the production. Our production meetings are at 8pm or 5am to accommodate time differences.

“I wrote the audiobook and so far, we have released four episodes on YouTube with visual illustrations – the latest on 28 November - with a projected completion date, for the

first season of 1 May 2026. Once episode eight completes, Paradox will be released on all major audio platforms i.e. Audible and Spotify.”

Paradox is opening doors for Luke. He said, “I was invited to Glasgow Anime and Gaming Con to present a panel on Independent Production and Getting Started in Voice Acting, and we premiered episode two in front of a live audience in Belfast Anime and Gaming Con. It is amazing to have this experience and to meet and network with the people from the

industry.”

Luke progressed to SERC following his GCSEs at Bangor Grammar School.

“My ambition is to work in the entertainment industry - live action or animation - and what I am doing now is taking me into that field. Qualifications are important, but in the entertainment industry, your calling card is experience and I am making that work for me now, through research, learning and making connections. It is like my own work placement. I have a portfolio to show already.”



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£1.1M MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS PROGRAMME

Communities Minister Gordon Lyons has announced that 134 grants will be issued to individuals, bands and groups from across Northern Ireland, who have been successful in the 2025/26 Musical Instruments Programme.

The programme was open to individuals, bands and professional and non-professional performing groups to purchase new musical instruments and replace old ones.

Minister Lyons said: "Firstly I want to congratulate all the successful applicants of this year's Arts Council of Northern Ireland's Musical Instruments Programme. Music is part of our culture and it enriches our cultural experiences."

"I recognise that funding is a challenge for many individuals, bands, groups and organisations across

the entire music and arts sector so I am pleased to be able to announce this funding which makes a difference across Northern Ireland.

I am also very pleased to see the spread of funding reaches all local council areas."

The Musical Instruments Programme is designed to help musicians in Northern Ireland replace their old, worn-out instruments and purchase new ones.

A total of 134 grants have been awarded through the Programme, which saw 94 bands (£819,405), 12



professional and non-professional performing groups (£134,928) and 28 professional musicians (£148,667) receive funding.

The Musical Instruments

Programme includes three strands:

- The Bands strand of the programme was created to support bands based in Northern Ireland, which are formally constituted, including accordion, brass, flute, pipe, wind and concert bands.

- The Professional and Non-Professional Performing Groups category was open to choirs and orchestras, community music groups, musical societies, primary and post primary schools and youth groups.

- The third strand is for Individual Professional Musicians.

More information on the successful applicants can be found on the Arts Council NI website at <https://artscouncil-ni.org/resources/musical-instruments-awards>

Bangor Integrated Nursery School: Celebrating Diversity and Excellence in Early Years Education

Bangor Integrated Nursery School is a welcoming, stand-alone nursery school committed to nurturing little learners in the heart of Bangor since opening in 1942 as Bangor Nursery School.

Located at 4 Castle Park Road, the school has undergone a significant transformation to embrace an Integrated ethos, officially opening its doors under its current name in September 2022. The school aims to recognise, value, and celebrate the uniqueness of every child and the diversity of its school community within a caring, inclusive, child-centred environment. A strength highlighted by ETI in their most recent Inspection report in 2024.

The School's transformation in September 2022 to become Bangor Integrated Nursery School was the result of a long journey towards integrated status. The school aims to bring together children from all backgrounds, traditions, and faiths to learn together every day in a shared setting. They are currently the only Integrated Nursery

provision in Bangor.

Bangor Integrated Nursery School provides a stimulating learning environment following the Northern Ireland Pre-School Curriculum. The school currently offers 78 full-time places for children in their pre-school year across three full-time classes; the Hedgehog, Squirrel, and Rabbit Classes. Class times for all classes are from 9:00 am to 1:30 pm. Every class is taught by a fully qualified teacher with a specialism in Early Years Education; supported by highly experienced nursery assistants. Beyond the curriculum, the school's offering is significantly enhanced by its commitment to practical, inclusive, and nature-focused learning. For instance, the school is an accredited Forest School, which utilises its mature outdoor spaces for

immersive, nature-based learning experiences. Furthermore, it holds Eco-School status, promoting environmental awareness. Inclusion is a key focus, demonstrated by its recognition as a Makaton Friendly School and its receipt of the Autism Impact Award from Autism NI, highlighting a dedication to supporting the needs of all learners and helping every child meet their potential.

The school boasts a wide range of learning spaces designed to encourage exploration and investigation. Inside, children play and learn across three large, bright classrooms and a shared cloakroom area with dedicated teaching spaces for small groups. However, the outdoor provision is a particular highlight. It features an outdoor classroom, a side garden

equipped with a sand house, brick playhouse, and mud kitchens, as well as a large playground complete with Learning Houses, a large Climbing Frame and plenty of space for bikes, trikes and scooters! Additionally, the mature Long Garden offers natural features such as a willow tunnel, mud kitchen, vegetable patches, buddy huts, swing and a birch story circle. To complement these physical spaces, the school integrates digital technology purposefully and effectively, using interactive panels, age-appropriate educational technology tools and the Seesaw app to record learning, enhance research, and maintain a strong connection between the classroom and families.

For the most up-to-date information please refer to the school's official website: <http://www.bangornurseryschool.co.uk/>

New Pilot Project to Tackle Domestic Abuse and Homelessness supported through NIHE's Homeless Prevention Fund

Housing Rights has received funding from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) for a bespoke pilot project, designed to provide crucial support for people affected by domestic abuse and homelessness across Northern Ireland.

The project, which has been funded for an initial six months through NIHE's Homeless Prevention Fund, will deliver tailored housing advice and support to people affected by domestic abuse and either at risk of or already experiencing homelessness, in community locations across Northern Ireland. The pilot will see the provision of dedicated advice clinics to ensure people

in crisis get the help they need, when they need it.

The project is the first stage of a new service the housing charity plan to deliver to ensure improved support for the increasing number of households affected by the issue. According to statistics from 2024/25, the PSNI is called to a property in relation to domestic abuse every 17 minutes, and in 2024/25, 1, 2059 households presented

as homeless to the NIHE due to domestic abuse. The true figures are much higher and often go unreported due to stigma and fear.

This project will allow Housing Rights to deliver person-centred legal and housing support directly to those who need it the most. The project will focus particularly on areas outside of Belfast, working in partnership with local

Women's Aid groups and NIHE regional offices.

In addition, Housing Rights has also been funded to upskill 90 frontline staff in the housing sector, so that they can better support those who have experienced domestic abuse.

The training, which was co-developed with women who had experienced domestic abuse and homelessness, uses an immersive Virtual Reality experience, alongside a knowledge-based training module to build empathy, raise awareness and develop the skills needed to support people experiencing domestic abuse with their housing issues.

Key Project Features:

- Targeted Support: Focused on people affected by domestic abuse and homelessness.

- NIHE Funding: Secured for the first six months via the Homelessness Prevention Fund.

- Services: Delivery of housing clinics, advocacy, and representation.

- Partnership: Working closely with local Women's Aid and NIHE, with an emphasis on regional areas.

Stephen Dunne MLA

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Taking a gander at our winter visitors: Geese

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

At this time of year many species migrate south from Canada, Iceland and other northern countries to find food and shelter during the cold dark days, and there's something about their wild calls and easy, purposeful flight, often in V formation, which tugs at our hearts, evocative of unrestricted freedom.

Indeed, historically, people have venerated wild geese, and for instance, the term was applied to the Irish Jacobite soldiers who left Ireland in 1691 following their defeat in the Williamite War, an event commemorated as the 'Flight of the Wild Geese'.

My favourite native geese are the light-bellied brents which visit Strangford Lough and our east coasts in thousands every year, but there's another goose with an interesting mixed heritage.

Greylag geese are large... up to 3 foot in length... and it's their size which attracted humans to regard them as food, not just by killing them, but domesticating them, as we did with cows, sheep and all the rest, and they became what we might call the farmyard goose. Yet unlike those other domesticated animals, and despite all the subsequent goose-for-food breeding programmes over centuries, greylags still exist as a species.

They still migrate south for winter from Iceland, but others stay here year-round, mating and breeding, mainly the offspring and descendants of escaped domesticated geese, what the scientists call 'feral', a word mainly used to describe domesticated animals...cats, dogs, etc... which have returned to the wild.

On a clear cold winter day, when we hear the haunting honking of geese it's hard not to stop what we're doing, to look up and admire these magical wild birds as they fly past. Perhaps part of their attraction is that they always seem to know where they're going...

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BLOOMING BRILLIANT

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

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

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

Their unique characteristic of continuing to grow and gracefully bend towards light adds a dynamic, living element to your arrangements. Pair them with a simple



glass vase for an elegant, modern look.

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

Be sure to remove the pollen stamens to prevent staining and prolong their freshness.

Finally, don't overlook Chrysanthemums. Especially the 'Cremon' or 'Santini' varieties, these resilient blooms are winter superstars. They come in an incredible range of shapes, sizes, and colors, from dense pom-poms to delicate

daisies. They are incredibly versatile, fitting seamlessly into both traditional and contemporary settings, and will easily outlast many other cut flowers, keeping your home looking lovely long after the last of the tinsel is packed away.

Embrace the beauty of these hardy blooms to banish the post-holiday blues and infuse your home with natural elegance.

Dan Sten Olsson awarded Honorary Doctorate by Queen's University Belfast

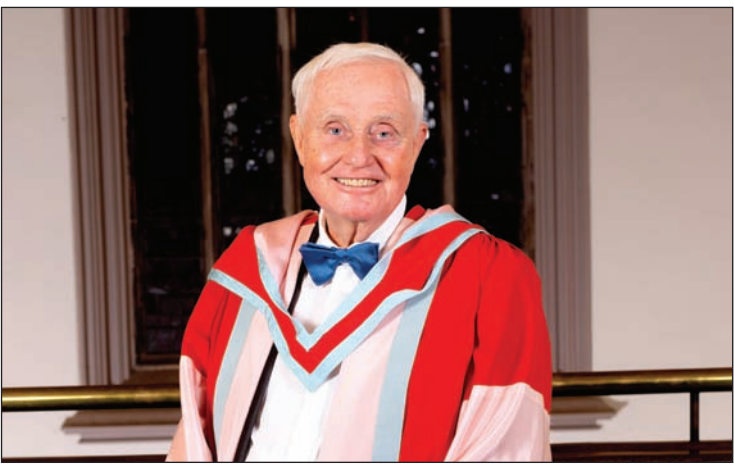
Dan Sten Olsson, Chief Executive of Stena Sphere was awarded an honorary doctorate by Queen's University Belfast in recognition of his impact across industry and commerce through his global leadership as well as Stena Line's long-term

The honorary degree was formally conferred during the University's winter graduation ceremonies on Tuesday 2nd December.

Dan Stena Olsson joined Stena Sphere, the family-owned global business in 1972 and under his leadership, it has grown into one of Sweden's largest privately owned companies. It has business interests across Europe including Stena Line ferry operations, offshore drilling, real estate and metal recycling. This year Stena Line, the largest ferry operator on the Irish Sea marked the 30th anniversary of operations in Belfast Harbour.

Mr Olsson commented: "I am deeply honoured and humbled to receive this recognition from Queen's University Belfast. To be recognised by such a prestigious and internationally respected educational institution is a privilege that I accept with both joy and gratitude."

Mr Olsson added: "The city of Belfast holds a very special place in my heart and for 30 years, Stena Line has been proud to call Belfast one of our most important business hubs. My family and I



have developed a strong and heartfelt connection to Belfast and its people, and it's such a wonderful surprise to be recognised in this unique way by a city we hold in such high esteem."

Queen's University Belfast also recognised seven other inspiring honorary graduates during the winter graduation ceremony, recognising global achievement in diplomacy, business, science, the arts and community life. Among those honoured were playwright Owen

McCafferty; Finnebrogue co-founder Christine Lynn; distinguished US diplomat The Honourable Barbara J. Stephenson.

Professor Sir Ian Greer, President and Vice-Chancellor of Queen's University Belfast, said: "Our honorary graduates this winter represent excellence across so many fields, from diplomacy and business to medicine, the arts and community service. Each has made a distinctive and lasting contribution to society, reflecting the values of Queen's and inspiring others to make their own

mark on the world."

Stena Line is the largest ferry operator on the Irish Sea, with the biggest fleet providing up to 238 weekly sailings offering the widest choice of routes including: combined passenger and freight services from Belfast to Cairnryan and Liverpool, Dublin to Holyhead, Rosslare to Fishguard, in addition to the dedicated freight only routes from Belfast to Heysham and Dublin. This year Stena Line celebrated 30 years of operations in Belfast Harbour and in Dublin Port.

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WAYS TO GET AHEAD IN 2026

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

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

Next, aim for Minimalist Momentum by systematically decluttering your environment and routine. A simpler environment leads to less decision fatigue. Implement the “tidy-up trio”—a commitment to remove three non-essential items daily. Simultaneously,



reclaim the luxury of a less busy schedule by ruthlessly pruning non-essential social and professional commitments. For financial simplicity, automate all routine tasks, transforming passive spending into active saving.

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

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

Finally, prioritize Macro-Health through consistent, enjoyable micro-habits—forget extreme changes. Commit to the “5-minute movement rule” daily, whether it's stretching or a quick

walk. Make hydration automatic by drinking water immediately upon waking, and maintain a consistent sleep wind-down routine to prime your body for rest. Couple this physical foundation with a dynamic Growth Mindset that actively schedules “skill-play” time for fun. View every setback not as a failure, but as valuable, actionable feedback, ensuring you remain curious, adaptable, and fully engaged with the opportunities 2026 will bring.

Leading the Way into 2026 with a Growing Team

McQueenie Boyle Solicitors continues to deliver professional, experienced and, above all, friendly legal advice to the local community.

Founded by Karen McQueenie in 2001, McQueenie Boyle Solicitors as it is now known, is entering into a well established 25 years of business in Bangor. Their welcoming, centrally located offices overlook Bangor Marina, with ample free parking, making them an accessible and convenient choice for clients across Bangor and North Down.

In 2005, Karen was joined in partnership by Fiona Boyle. Together, they have grown the practice into the thriving firm it is today, now comprising five fully qualified solicitors. Assistant Solicitor Natalie Bronkhorst has been a valued member of the team for seven years and is highly respected by clients within the Conveyancing department.

McQueenie Boyle is also

delighted to welcome two new team members: Natalie Bell and Molly Hamilton.

Natalie brings extensive experience in residential Conveyancing, Wills and Estate matters, having led successful departments across Bangor and Belfast. Known for her strong client relationships and commercial awareness, she is a valuable addition to the team and enhances the firm's commitment to exceptional client care.

The firm is especially proud of Molly's development, having recently supported her throughout her degree and subsequently through her training contract to become a fully qualified Solicitor. Molly is a key member of the team and works alongside Fiona Boyle within the Matrimonial and Family Department.




McQueenie Boyle offers a full range of legal services for life's key moments: buying or selling a home, navigating the end of a relationship, recovering from an accident or planning ahead with a Will - Karen, Fiona and the team are committed to providing clear, approachable and friendly support whenever you need it most.

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IRELAND'S HIDDEN HEARTLANDS REGIONAL BRAND TO BE USED IN FERMANAGH

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

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

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

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

The licensing agreement has been put in place to build on the strong cross-border collaboration which already exists between tourism businesses and public bodies in Co Fermanagh and their Ireland's Hidden Heartlands counterparts.

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

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

"The inclusion of Co Fermanagh, with its serene

lakes, ancient landscapes, deep sense of tranquillity and welcoming communities, will enrich the overall brand, offering visitor experiences which are authentic and profoundly memorable."

Caroline Bocquel, CEO of Fáilte Ireland, said: "This agreement creates new opportunities for tourism businesses across Ireland's Hidden Heartlands in both jurisdictions."

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

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

"From the River Shannon to Lough Erne, intercon-



Economy Minister Dr Caoimhe Archibald is pictured with Laura McCorry, Chief Executive of Tourism Northern Ireland, Gillian Beare Co-Director Finn Lough Resort, Barry Flanagan Owner Erne Water Taxi and Alice Mansergh, Chief Executive of Tourism Ireland, at the announcement of the inclusion of County Fermanagh into the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand.

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

"We'll be promoting the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand as part of our overseas marketing programmes, in partnership with industry and agencies on the ground.

Ultimately, helping overseas visitors first choose the island and then explore across geographies supports broad benefits for businesses and communities."

Howdens Bangor is under New Management

Rebecca Wilsdon has taken up the role of Manager of Howdens Bangor having previously served in Howdens where I have worked in business development, design and management along with designing at Beggs and Partners.

Attracted by the opportunity to steer the success of the fast-growing depot, located at Balloo Drive, Bangor - Rebecca is looking forward to the challenge!

She says: "I'm excited for the opportunity to manage the Bangor branch and set Balloo Drive Bangor on the map for 2026. I have a fantastic team who are all passionate about what that do."

These are exciting times for Howdens as the company is rapidly expanding across Northern Ireland. Howdens have upwards of 900 depots in the UK and do much of their own manufacturing in kitchens, bedrooms and Joinery. The

company prides itself on providing the best service to customers, and as a result, have become the UK's Number 1 Trade Kitchen Supplier. There are 1000's of lines available for immediate delivery. As well as building strong relationships with customers, Howdens won't be beaten on price.

Rebecca and her team look forward to welcoming their customers for a free design appointment or just to catch up over a coffee!

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ROLE OF VOLUNTEERS IN THE HEALTH SERVICE

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

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

Sam's role as a Meeter and Greeter involves him helping to check in patients for their appointments using an online system, helping them to locate the clinic

they need to attend and providing that listening ear to those that need it most.

Reflecting on his decision to Volunteer, Sam said, "When I became a Volunteer, I did not know much about the role of a Meeter and Greeter or what it involved. When I started out, the support I received was amazing. I was shadowed for a few days and learned so much from that experience. Since then, I have developed my own skills as I have progressed in the role."

Sam shared how

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

"I love meeting people and making new friends. I have always had that desire to serve others. The staff in the Outpatients Department are wonderful to work alongside. I am here three days a week

and they make it such an enjoyable experience, I feel like part of the team."

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

"Volunteers play a crucial role across the



Trust, supporting not just patients but staff as well. Many of our Volunteers tell us they have made new friends and that Volunteering prevents them from becoming socially isolated after retirement. It brings joy and purpose to their lives. We also have many young Volunteers who gain invaluable experience that helps them onto the employment ladder."

Sonya added, "As we mark International Volunteer Day, I want to thank all our Volunteers for their commitment, kindness and dedication.

Every day, they help improve the lives of our patients and make our services better."

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

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

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Education Minister announces expansion of Pre-School education provision

Education Minister Paul Givan has announced that an additional 102 pre-school settings across Northern Ireland have been approved to offer full-time pre-school education from September 2026.

This is the second cohort of settings which have been approved to move to offering full time places under the Pre-school Standardisation programme.

The Minister made the announcement following a recent visit to Anahilt Pre-school Playgroup, one of the 102 settings approved to transition to the standardised 22.5 hours per week in September 2026.

Paul Givan said: "The Pre-school Standardisation Programme has already seen 105 settings successfully transition to full time sessions in September 2025. It is

already making a difference to over 2,500 children and their families.

"Today's announcement is another step forward in my commitment to standardise all funded pre-school education provision to 22.5 hours per week.

"A further 102 settings have been approved to move to full time sessions from September 2026. This will mean that approximately 50% of pre-school provision, in every area of Northern Ireland, will be full time.

"Providing this additional time in the day will allow the children to benefit



Education Minister Paul Givan is pictured at Anahilt Pre-school Playgroup, Hillsborough with pupils and Dara Graham, Preschool Leader.

from the rich play-based learning environment of the pre-school setting, allow pre-school staff more time

to interact with and support young learners and also provide access to a funded school meal for eligible children."

Dara Graham, Preschool Leader at Anahilt Pre-school Playgroup, said: "I am absolutely delighted that our setting has been chosen to move to the full 22.5 hours.

This is a fantastic step for our children and families, and we are so proud to be part of this next stage in early years provision.

As a community-run, charitable preschool, we see every day how much early education matters,

and this decision will allow us to offer even more stability, support and opportunities for our little ones."

Paul Givan continued: "This investment in our pre-school sector clearly demonstrates the value that I place on early years education in Northern Ireland."

The full list of the approved pre-school settings is available on the Department's website at: www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/ministers-decisions-pre-school-settings-requesting-transition-september-2026

NIHF Fundraiser Raises £4,115 for Cancer Fund for Children

The Northern Ireland Hotels Federation (NIHF) Fundraiser, held at the Hospitality Exchange Gala Ball, has raised £4,115 for Cancer Fund for Children.

Discussing the donation, NIHF President Vicky Green said:

"We're thrilled that our members gave so generously to support Cancer Fund for Children. A childhood cancer diagnosis impacts every aspect of family life and the work this charity does to ensure no child or young person has to face cancer alone is truly remarkable. Their therapeutic, emotional and practical support brings comfort, strength and resilience to families at a time when they need it most. We are proud to play a small part in helping them continue this vital work."

Thanking the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation, Sarah Clements, Partnerships & Philanthropy Lead Executive at Cancer Fund for Children, adds:

"We're immensely grateful to the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation for their wonderful support. By working together, we help ensure that children and young people across the island of Ireland never have to face cancer alone. Their generosity enables us



The Northern Ireland Hotels Federation (NIHF) has raised £4,115 for Cancer Fund for Children. NIHF President Vicky Green is pictured with Sarah Clements, Partnerships & Philanthropy Lead Executive at Cancer Fund for Children.

to deliver the right support at the right time, whether that is individual, group or therapeutic care, to bring hope, strength and joy to

families when they need it most."

For further information visit [Cancer Fund For Children](http://CancerFundForChildren.org).

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

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Company director

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

"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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NEW ADVICE CLINIC FOR REDBURN AND LOUGHVIEW.

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

Community Advice Ards and North Down (CAAND) is one of the largest independent advice agencies in North Ireland and has a team of 32 staff and 15 volunteers, who provide advice, help and support on a wide variety of issues, including benefits, debt, employment, appeals representation at social security and employment tribunals, housing problems and many more topics.

All CAAND staff are highly trained, with debt staff being authorised by The Financial Conduct Authority to carry out all debt advice, help and support. This includes applying for debt relief orders, individual Voluntary Agreements and bankruptcies. Business debt can also be advised on.

The new advice clinic will be held every Friday from 2pm-4pm at the

Redburn Loughview premises on Abbey Ring and will provide advice, help and support on a vast range of issues, including debt, social security benefits, appeals, tribunals, housing, legal, health, discrimination, employment, immigration, relationship, land law and consumer issues.

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

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



(L-R) Cllr Gillian McCollum, Susan Johnson RLCF, Stephen Hollywood CAAND, and Lynn McAuley RCLF

sure to reach more people in need of support. The advice offered by CAAND is friendly, free and entirely confidential, and I would urge anyone in the area

who is worried about their finances or benefit entitlements to make use of the clinic.

"Going forward, I hope the clinic will prove valuable to people in

the neighbourhood. As a local representative, I will continue to work with both organisations and help identify interventions for the benefit of the area."

Transform Your Home for the New Year with The Blind Spot

There's no better time to turn your house into a warm, stylish haven.

For over 30 years, The Blind Spot has been Belfast's trusted name for custom-made window coverings, and this year, they're helping you create the perfect winter sanctuary by launching a brand-new curtain department!

Founded in 1990 by manager Krystina Bradford's mum and grandfather, this family-run business has always focused on manufacturing and fitting top-notch window solutions. While they're already experts in venetian, vertical, roller, and roman blinds, their new offering allows for even more flexibility in styling your space.

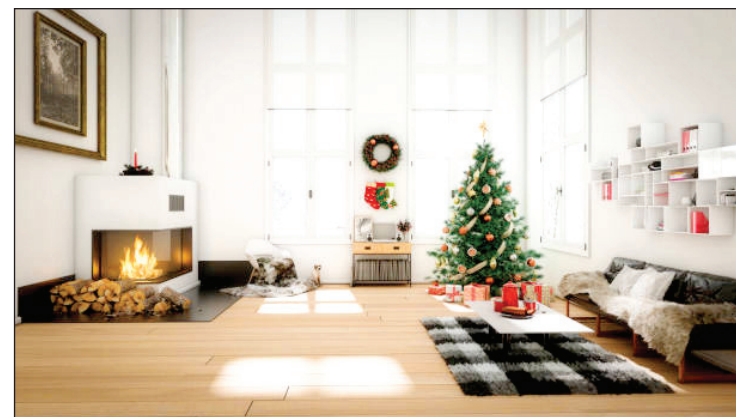
Their new curtain department provides beautiful made-to-measure curtains and curtain rails, complete with a full

measuring and fitting service. Whether you're dreaming of plush, thick drapes for a traditional Christmas feel or lighter, elegant fabrics to frame your windows, The Blind Spot now has every solution covered.

As the temperature drops, your windows become a crucial defence against the chill. Did you know that investing in quality blinds and shutters can significantly improve your home's thermal insulation? By choosing products from The Blind Spot, you can say goodbye to wasted heat and hello to a warmer, cozier home this winter, saving energy while staying snug.

Beyond traditional coverings, The Blind Spot also offers innovative solutions for modern living, including:

- Motorised blinds to streamline your daily routine—perfect for those hard-to-reach windows.



- Blindscreens, manufactured in the UK, which offer total blackout and bug-free access on any window or bi-fold door, revolutionising how you manage your connection to the outdoors.

To ensure your home is perfectly dressed and ready for all your Christmas visitors, remember that made-to-measure quality takes time. The Blind Spot

takes pride in crafting every order with precision, and they can deliver and install many orders within 6 weeks.

To guarantee your new blinds, curtains, or shutters are fitted before the holidays, it is essential to place your order as soon as possible. Don't delay—get ahead of the seasonal rush to secure your installation slot!

The Blind Spot offers

a free measuring service across all of Northern Ireland, ensuring a perfect fit every time. Their mission is to provide affordable prices without compromising on quality or choice.

You can explore a wide range of styles, fabrics, and colours, including their beautiful Sante Fe shutters, which can be installed in as little as six weeks.

Stop by the new showroom at 4 East Belfast Enterprise Park, Belfast BT5 4GX.

The showroom is open throughout the week and also on Saturdays from 9:00 AM to 12:00 PM. The team is always ready to help you schedule a home appointment for a personalised quote.

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THE CRITICALLY IMPORTANT WORK OF NDAWA

Emalyn Turkington, CEO, explains how NDAWA continues to provide frontline services to women, young people and children affected by domestic and sexual abuse, even though resources are being stretched to the limit.

The work of NDAWA is critical in working with women, children and young people affected by domestic abuse in the Ards and North Down area. NDAWA are seeing more women seeking support staying with their abusive partner as they cannot afford to leave, or women who have left the abusive home who need more support with finances/ budgeting and debt management.

When needed, NDAWA will do what they can to help women in financial difficulties with their basic needs of food, electric, gas or oil. At times they can secure funding for these situations, at other times they use monies from donations NDAWA have received from generous donors. It is always great when the public or other agencies donate money or raise money for NDAWA.

Christmas can be a challenging time for many families, even more so for families that live in an abusive environment. Help and support is available. North Down & Ards Women's Aid have emergency refuge accommodation and community support services available. We are open and here to help and have been supporting women and children throughout the year. You can directly support women and children this Christmas by donating money, gifts or vouchers to NDAWA. Please visit our website www.ndawomensaid.org for details on how to donate or phone on 028 9127 3196.



Strathearn School named top school in Northern Ireland

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

The rankings are based on 2025 examination results, when pupils at Strathearn School recorded 83% grades A*-B at A-level. The same year, 79% of all GCSE grades achieved by Strathearn pupils were A* or A – the highest year on record for the School.

Strathearn emphasises a caring, supportive environment where "each individual is valued." The school aims not only for academic success, but also for the personal growth of pupils: fostering confidence, self-esteem, a love of learning, and a sense of belonging.

Strathearn School Principal Nicola Connery commented: "Having consistently ranked in the top cohort of grammar schools in this prestigious report, we are thrilled to rank in first place this year – particularly given the exceptionally high quality of grammar schools listed across Northern Ireland.

"This is testament to the outstanding hard work, talent and determination of our pupils, the support and encouragement of their families at home, and the inspirational dedication of our superb team of teaching and non-teaching staff."

Whilst the rankings focus on examination results, Mrs Connery said that Strathearn's success "transcends all aspects of school life".

"Our ethos as a school centres on providing a caring and nurturing environment in which every pupil is celebrated for their own individual talents and is encouraged to realise their full potential across a wide range of both curricular and extra-curricular areas."

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

Credit: The Sunday Times Parent Power Guide 2026





OPEN DAY

Saturday 10th January 9.15-12.30pm
Principal's talks 9.30, 10.30 and 11.30am



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REALISTIC FITNESS GOALS FOR THE FAMILY

The key to successful family fitness in 2026 is setting realistic, sustainable, and fun goals using the S.M.A.R.T. framework: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timely.



Instead of focusing on high-pressure resolutions, prioritize small, consistent habits that become lifelong routines. Core family targets could include scheduling three active sessions per week (like biking or hiking) and incorporating a non-negotiable 15-minute

family walk after dinner to increase daily movement and reduce screen time.

Goals should be tailored to age. For kids and teens, focus on fun and skill development, such as trying a new sport or training for a family 5k fun run. Busy adults should aim

for consistency over intensity, incorporating three 10-minute "micro-workouts" on busy days and one strength training session weekly. Older adults should prioritize balance and mobility, for example dedicating 10 minutes daily to gentle stretching or chair yoga. To ensure long-term

success, use a central tracking chart to monitor progress and celebrate effort rather than perfection.

By making movement a collaborative and non-punitive part of your routine, you will build a healthier and more connected family in 2026.

The Busy Parent's Guide to Self-Care

The term "self-care" often conjures images of luxurious, uninterrupted leisure: an hour-long massage, a quiet afternoon reading, or, yes, a long bubble bath.

While wonderful, these activities are often completely out of reach for the typical busy parent juggling work, school runs, appointments, and household chaos.

True parental self-care isn't about escaping reality; it's about making strategic, micro-adjustments to your daily life to refill your cup without needing a full-scale vacation. It's about maintaining your emotional and physical reserves so you can show up as the parent you want to be.

Here are some Quick Wins for Instant Relief

When you only have a few minutes, focus on simple, high-impact resets that shift you out of the stress response.

The Power of the 4-7-8 Breath: When you feel tension rising (e.g., during homework struggles or traffic), use this quick calming technique: Inhale silently through your nose for a count of 4. Hold your breath for a count of 7. Exhale completely through your mouth with a "whoosh" sound for a count of 8. Repeat 3-4 times. It physically

lowers your heart rate.

Tactical Hydration: Keep a water bottle with you at all times. Taking a big drink of cold water can provide a surprisingly quick mental and physical break.

Dehydration often mimics fatigue and irritability.

The "Sensory Reset": Engage one of your senses. Spray a scent (like peppermint or citrus oil) or listen to one specific song on headphones. This

interrupts the mental loop of worry or to-do lists and grounds you in the present moment.

Mindful Movement: Instead of sitting down, stretch while waiting for the kettle to boil or for the kids to put on their shoes. A quick 60-second neck roll, shoulder shrug, or a forward bend releases physical tension instantly.

The most sustainable

form of self-care is integrating it into your existing routine, rather than scheduling an extra activity.

By focusing on these small, consistent acts of self-care, you shift the perspective from "How can I escape?" to "How can I sustain myself?" You don't need a bubble bath; you just need to honour your own needs within the structure of your busy life.

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ALL-NEW LEAF HITS THE ROAD

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

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

Designed at Nissan's Global Design Studio in Atsugi, Japan and built at Nissan's Sunderland Plant, UK, the all-new LEAF presents a dynamic crossover look that blends aerodynamic efficiency and visual impact. With a drag coefficient of just

0.25, the car's clean, flowing appearance not only looks sharp and brings a real presence to the road, it also supports the model's excellent 386 miles top range and its general efficiency.

Supporting its sleek and streamlined look, Nissan LEAF boasts a host of upgraded exterior features, carefully engineered to catch the eye and confirm that our zero-emission masterpieces don't skip on style.

The cabin inside is spacious and family-ready, including up to 437 litres (VDA) of cargo space. Power liftgate and roof rail options add flexibility, while seven expressive colour



choices – including signature Luminous Teal – ensure the Nissan LEAF can be personalised to suit families, commuters,

urban explorers and weekend day-trippers alike.

Built on the CMF-EV modular platform shared with the

Nissan Ariya, LEAF delivers engaging yet comfortable driving. The suspension - MacPherson at the front and multi-link

at the rear – ensures a smooth, agile drive across city streets and motorways.

At the heart of the Nissan LEAF

is a refined electric motor delivering clean and responsive performance – 215hp of power and 355Nm of torque power the LEAF from 0 to 62mph in 7.6 seconds (Sport Mode / 75kwh battery). With 4.5 miles/kWh miles energy consumption, all-new LEAF ensures effortless driving with maximum efficiency.

The Nissan LEAF is equipped with a suite of advanced safety and driver assistance features, designed to support confident driving in all conditions. From Intelligent Emergency Braking and Blind Spot Intervention to Rear Cross Traffic Alert and Lane Keep Assist, Nissan

LEAF is engineered to deliver peace of mind. Additional features such as the 3D Around View Monitor, Invisible Hood View, and Front Wide View make parking and navigating tight spaces easier and safer.

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

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

The MINI Paul Smith Edition.

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

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

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

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



Metallic from the current MINI Family.

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

In addition to the colour variants, numerous details characterise Paul Smith's signature and make the MINI Paul Smith Edition unmistakable: The 'Signature Stripe', a central design feature of the British designer, adorns the roof in Nottingham Green at the rear of the driver's side. The alternative

version of the roof features elegant stripes in Jet Black in varying thickness, both matte and glossy. The MINI Cooper Convertible Paul Smith Edition is supplied with a black soft top.

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

British character is also reflected in the interior with numerous components featuring

a modern, elegant look. The knitted surfaces on the dashboard and door panels appear in black, while Paul Smith fabrics in tone-on-tone stripe patterns serve as inspiration for the special structure of the dashboard. The Nightshade Blue sports seats are made of Vescin and have knitted textile in the shoulder and headrest areas. Drawn from the Signature Stripe, the decorative stitching on the steering wheel's textile band is designed in bright colours – quintessentially Paul Smith.

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

Jeep® Wrangler named The Sun Road trip Car of the Year

Jeep® has triumphed at the 2025 News UK Motor Awards, with Wrangler being named The Sun Road trip Car of the Year.

This win is notable, as Wrangler is the first car to win this brand-new category that reflects the growing appetite among drivers for hitting the road and creating new adventures, core values that remain at the heart of Jeep.

Wrangler won the award for its ability to defy limits and fulfill the road-trip dreams of those seeking adventures around the world. Its versatility and ability to provide true open-air freedom, with its removeable roof and doors, set it apart and make it the ideal car to make unforgettable memories with.

Wrangler has cemented itself as the benchmark for the off-road capabilities and ruggedness that are inherent to Jeep.

Blending style with practicality, Wrangler adapts to the different needs of road trippers across the world. Unmatched off-road capability, removable doors and roof and a foldable windscreen make it the perfect car for exploring the world.

Wrangler also benefits from the latest Advanced Driver-Assistance Systems (ADAS) and Uconnect infotainment system, making road trips comfortable and enjoyable.

Kristian Cholmondeley, MD of Jeep UK said, "At Jeep we encourage everyone to get out and explore the world around them with friends and loved ones. Wrangler has the style and capability to undertake any adventure. There's no better way to live out

our motto of 'Go Anywhere, Do Anything' than by hitting the road and seeking the freedom that doing so provides - this award proves that."

Rob Gill, Motoring Editor of The Sun, said "Nothing is off-limits in the all-American hero, and you can whip off the roof and the doors while you're at it. Wrangler is the

perfect companion for unforgettable adventures on the road trip you always promised yourself."

Launched in 2018, The News UK Motor Awards are judged by industry respected automotive journalists from across News UK's titles. Categories honoured include Luxury, Sports, Family, Adventure and Electric.

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SETTING YOUR 2026 HOME REPAIR BUDGET

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

A house isn't a stagnant asset; it's a collection of systems that require constant funding.

By budgeting proactively, you replace the stress of emergency repairs with the power of planned investments.

Calculating Your Annual Maintenance

Budget

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

- The 1% Rule of Thumb: Budget 1% to 4% of your home's value annually for maintenance and

repairs. If your home is valued at £300,000, that means allocating £3,000 to £12,000 per year.

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

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

- The Component Age Method (More Accurate): Instead of a percentage, look at the remaining lifespan of your major systems.

This is the most accurate approach for long-term planning.

If a new roof costs £12,000 and is expected to last 20 years, you



should budget £600 per year for the roof alone.

Repeat this for your boiler, water heater, etc.

Establishing an

Emergency Fund for Major Replacements

While the annual budget covers ongoing costs (gutter cleaning, boiler service, minor plumbing), a separate Capital Replacement Fund is essential for high-cost, systems-level failures that often happen suddenly. This includes your Boiler/heating system, roof, water heater and exterior paint/render.

Start with a Goal: Aim to save a minimum

of £3,000 to £5,000 as a readily available, "liquid" emergency fund for unexpected events like a burst pipe or structural repair.

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

inevitably fails in mid-winter.

The Upgrade vs. Repair Decision

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

The 50% Rule (Cost vs. Replacement)

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

Age vs. Efficiency (The Payback Period)

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

Repair if: The

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

Upgrade if: The system is over 15 years old or you've noticed a significant increase in energy bills. New A-rated condensing boilers or heat pumps are so much more efficient than older models that the energy savings often pay back the installation cost within a few years.

The Frequency of Failure

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

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A Checklist for Hiring a Contractor

The New Year often brings plans for renovation, repair, or that long-deferred major project. Yet, for many homeowners, the process of hiring a qualified professional—be it a plumber, electrician, or general contractor—is riddled with anxiety.

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

1. Verify Licensing and Insurance: Your Baseline Protection

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

- Licensing: The contractor must hold a current, valid license relevant to the work being performed in

your specific area. A licensed professional has demonstrated competency and is bound by industry standards and local building codes.

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

Pro Tip: Never rely solely on a photocopy. Look up the license number and insurance details yourself via the relevant local trade

or regulatory bodies to confirm they are active and in good standing.

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

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

Insist that the SOW clearly defines what is included and, crucially, what is not included. It must specify:

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

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



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

scope changes will be documented, priced, and approved by you before the work proceeds.

3. Review Portfolio Examples of Relevant Work

While enthusiasm is great, major projects demand proven experience.

Ask potential contractors for references and, specifically, photos or site visits related to the project you are hiring for.

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

4. Check References (and Ask the Right Questions)

Don't just ask for references; ask for the most recent references and actually call them. This is where you gain insight into

the contractor's process, not just their final product.

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

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

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

- Was the site kept tidy and safe?

- Would you hire them again?

5. Evaluate Communication and Professionalism

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

these cues:

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

- Clarity: Did they clearly and patiently answer your technical questions, or did they use jargon to confuse you?

- Respect: Did they respect your time, home, and budget constraints?

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

Efficiency Upgrades That Really Save You Money

When facing the costs of home maintenance, homeowners often ask: Which investments genuinely pay us back? With rising energy prices, the greatest return on investment (ROI) often comes not from aesthetics, but from efficiency.

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

Insulation: The Foundation of Savings

Before considering new technology, look at the basics. Proper insulation is arguably the best return on investment a homeowner can make. It's a one-time cost that dramatically reduces heat transfer, extending the life of your heating and cooling systems because they don't have to work as hard.

Attic/Loft: Ensure your loft meets current recommended insulation levels, focusing on the R-value (a measure of thermal resistance). Upgrading from older, shallow insulation to

modern, thick materials can cut heating bills by up to 25%.

Cavity Walls: If your home has unfilled cavity walls, insulating them is fast, relatively inexpensive, and stops a huge amount of heat from escaping.

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

Smart Thermostats: Smarter Heating, Not Harder

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



While a smart thermostat doesn't technically generate savings, it maximizes the efficiency of your existing system by eliminating wasted energy.

You stop heating an empty house. Furthermore, many models provide detailed energy usage reports, allowing you to identify and adjust inefficient habits. This technology offers a quick ROI, often

recouping its cost within the first year through optimised scheduling.

The Leap to Heat Pumps

For major, long-term savings, few systems rival the Air Source Heat Pump (ASHP). Unlike traditional boilers that burn fuel to create heat, ASHPs extract heat from the outside air (even when it's cold) and use a heat exchanger to transfer it

indoors.

While the initial installation cost is significant, government incentives and the unit's incredible efficiency make it a powerful investment:

Exceptional Efficiency: ASHPs produce significantly more energy than they consume, often achieving efficiencies of 300% or more, compared to around 90-95% for high-efficiency gas boilers.

Dual Function: They provide highly efficient heating in the winter and cooling in the summer, replacing two separate systems.

A heat pump represents the future of home heating, offering a substantial ROI over its 15- to 20-year lifespan through vastly lower running costs. When calculating your 2026 budget, prioritise efficiency; it's the professional way to future-proof your bills.

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