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A stand out schedule of free events are scheduled for the festival which this year has the theme Journey and will put young people centre stage.

YOUNG PEOPLE SET TO TAKE CENTRE STAGE AT 4 CORNERS FESTIVAL 2026

Young people and youth-led conversations will take centre stage at the 4 Corners Festival 2026, which returns to Belfast from January 30 to February 8 with the theme Journey.

The festival is a faith-based initiative delivered across venues in all four corners of the city, with events designed to encourage people to step beyond the physical and psychological "corners" of Belfast and encounter new

perspectives, new ideas and new connections.

The 2026 youth programme includes schools-based activity, sports and friendship-building, student discussion, youth travel and peacebuilding, and space for honest conversation about

masculinity and non-violence.

A key youth event, Passports Ready! takes place at QUB PEC, Botanic Park, Stranmillis at 10am on February 4, bringing primary school pupils from four Belfast schools together

with Peace Players NI for a day focused on sports skills and building connections, celebrating friendship and support on the sports field and in life.

Continued on page 4

BELFAST EXPENSIVE AREA FOR YOUNG DRIVER INSURANCE

Young motorists in Northern Ireland are facing hair raising car insurance premiums of £1470, just £8 off London, the UK's most expensive region.

Using data from Q4 2025, car insurance experts at CompareNI.com reviewed the insurance costs of teenage drivers both locally and across the UK to try and discover ways to reduce costs.

While most UK regions saw premiums for young drivers drop, prices in Northern Ireland rocketed by £152 over the previous quarter – the biggest jump anywhere in the UK.

London tops the list of most expensive regions in the UK for young drivers, with Northern Ireland coming a very close second, followed by

Yorkshire in third place. Across Northern Ireland, seven of the District Council areas saw teenagers facing premiums of over £2000, with Belfast, Lisburn & Castlereagh and Fermanagh & Omagh the worst affected.

Not surprisingly, the youngest drivers, 17 and 18-year-olds, were the most expensive to insure – with 18-old-drivers in Belfast facing eye-watering costs of more than £3000.

The average cost of car insurance in Northern Ireland is currently £626, which is £19 higher than the overall UK average.

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Purrfect plan Proposal submitted for Belfast's first cat café

Belfast may soon welcome its first cat café — a space designed as “a little haven” for both people and rescue cats — and the project is expected to create five new jobs.

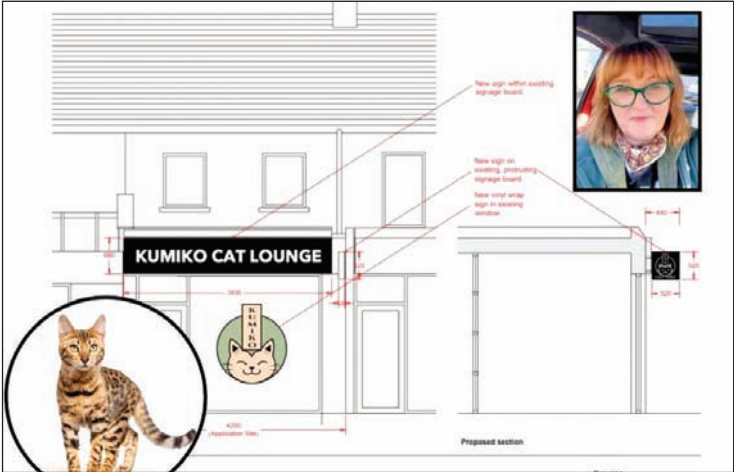
Karen Galway has submitted a planning application to Belfast City Council for Kumiko Cat Lounge Ltd, a venture that blends her lifelong love of animals with her professional background in mental health.

If approved, the former chemist at 328 Upper Newtownards Road will be transformed into a peaceful retreat where visitors can unwind alongside rescued cats.

According to the application, “A cat lounge is a space where cats and customers can relax and recharge. Visitors can enjoy the proven wellbeing benefits of spending time with cats.”

Cat cafés have become increasingly popular worldwide, particularly after taking off in Japan, though the idea originally began in Taipei.

As the first proposed cat café in Northern Ireland, the application outlines how the business will operate. Guests will not be allowed to bring their own pets. Instead, all cats will come from rescue shelters, be fully



vaccinated, and undergo health checks before joining the lounge.

Between eight and twelve cats will live on-site in a cage free environment. Staff and customer interaction will help support their emotional needs, improve their social skills, and increase their chances of being adopted into permanent homes.

Up to eight visitors per hour will be able to book sessions, allowing a maximum of 48 people per day. The application


notes that the lounge will employ five staff members, with two present during opening hours (11am–5pm). Staff will also attend outside these hours to care for the cats, and volunteers will assist at various times.

Strict cleaning and ventilation measures are planned to maintain an odour free environment, along with ongoing monitoring of cat behaviour to reduce stress and meet licensing requirements.

Snacks and drinks will be available on




a self service basis in a reception area that cats cannot access. The business also intends to sell small merchandise items such as badges, stickers, and mugs.

Galway, the daughter of a vet and a long time mental health researcher, said the project brings together her two passions. She hopes the lounge will offer a safe, nurturing environment for rescue cats on their way to finding permanent homes, while giving people a place to relax and benefit from time spent with animals.



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Continued from page 1

The programme also includes a Youth Action-led workshop, Exploring Masculinity With Young Men in Schools, which takes place at Youth Action, 14 College Square North, on the morning of February 4, creating space for honest conversation with young men aged 13 to 18 about how masculinity is shaped and expressed in everyday life, including pressures of proving oneself, gender roles, positive male influences, non-violence and empathy. A second Youth Action session, Reimagining Masculinity, takes place at 1.15pm on February 4 and is aimed at youth

practitioners, educators and community leaders, focusing on young men's perspectives and how to support respect, non-violence and authentic masculinities. Students are also specifically included in the 2026 schedule through Out To Lunch With Dr Jemar Tisby at Fitzroy Presbyterian Church, University Street, at 12.30pm on February 5, where students from Queen's and Ulster Universities will gather for a lunchtime conversation with the activist, historian and author, challenging students to think critically about Christianity, race, faith and justice. Youth travel and global connection is reflected in A Youth Journey From

Belfast To Katanga at Knock Methodist Centre, 17 Knock Road, at 7.30pm on January 31. The event centres on a November 2025 journey by five young people from South Belfast Alternatives who travelled to Kampala, Uganda to explore how youth use vision and resilience to change their communities. Emmanuel Trinity, Founder and CEO of era92 Group, and peacebuilder Tony Macaulay will share how the idea developed and will interview the young participants. The programme also includes All Aboard at Methodist College's Whitla Hall, Malone Road, at 7pm on February 5, where Play it by Ear will take audiences on "the

journey of a lifetime" with the help of children from some local schools. The festival's final day includes Our Corner of Creation at Forthspring Inter-Community Group, 373 to 375 Springfield Road, at 1.30pm on February 8, bringing young people from across Belfast together to explore environmental care and community stewardship of the earth's resources, with discussion in mixed groups on both the beauty and brokenness of the city and realistic steps that can address the challenges it faces. The 4 Corners Festival is supported by The Executive Office's Central Good Relations Fund, The Department of Foreign Affairs Reconciliation Fund and Belfast City Council Good Relations Fund, St Anne's Cathedral Sitout and Linen Quarter BID. All events are free to attend. To find out the full lineup of the festival and to book your tickets go to 4cornersfestival.com

Spring industry support programme

Tourism Northern Ireland has launched an exciting new programme of business opportunities to help the tourism sector supercharge their offering this Spring.

From an AI-themed webinar series and a Marketing Masterclass to Luxury Tourism Experience workshop, the programme includes 10 in-person and online events, which are taking place across eight locations. The Spring support programme kicked off in the new year with a 'Transform Your Analytics with AI – From Data to Decisions' webinar. A second instalment - 'AI for Accessibility – Opening Tourism to Everyone' – in this series takes place on February 10. On January 29, there will be a Sustainability Storytelling webinar while, on February 3, during a Marketing Masterclass event at the Crowne Plaza in Belfast, businesses will hear from

the expert marketing agencies who plan and create Tourism NI's award-winning marketing campaigns. Industry will also learn how they can get involved in the campaigns. Those attending will also hear directly from members of the Tourism NI marketing team about year-round promotional opportunities and practical ways to maximise visibility. Also on February 3, a Luxury Tourism Experience Workshop will show tourism businesses how to enhance their high-end market offerings. Led by luxury experts Fiona Herald and Grainne O'Malley, the session will provide practical tools, insights, and tailored feedback to help businesses develop,

refine, and market luxury experiences. During February and March, Tourism NI will deliver a series of Regional Roadshows which will be a combination of its popular Innovate Tourism workshops - in partnership with Innovate NI – as well as a new addition, Regional Business Clinics. These will give local industry the opportunity to have direct one-to-one appointments with Tourism NI teams to get advice and support in areas including marketing, events, e-learning and getting certified and graded. The first two sessions, which will take place on February 6 at The Valley Hotel in Fivemiletown and on February 11 at The Stormont Hotel in Belfast,

will help businesses enhance competitiveness and market appeal to visitors. Further sessions in March with Innovate NI will focus on enhancing competitiveness and market appeal to visitors. In addition, Tourism NI's flagship 'Meet the Buyer' event will take place at ICC Belfast on March 26 and 27. The event will provide tourism businesses with an excellent opportunity to both connect with international buyers from Northern Ireland's key markets and showcase their products and offerings to secure contracts for 2026/27. Eimear Callaghan, Head Further information about the Spring programme is available at Tourism Enterprise Development Programme

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Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026

Belfast City Council and Comhaltas have just announced the key city centre venues that will host Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann this summer.

As Belfast tunes up to hold the iconic event for the first time (Sunday 2 to Sunday 9 August 2026), organisers have also launched an open call for artists to perform on the festival's main outdoor stage. The Gig Rig, the beating heart of the Fleadh, will be located at Belfast City Hall, providing a feast of free performances from both big-name acts and emerging talent, as well as the event's opening and closing ceremonies. With just over 200 days to go, applications are now being sought from traditional musicians, emerging artists,

youth groups, community ensembles and innovative collaborations which reflect the festival's traditions, push creative boundaries and showcase Belfast's diversity. Artists interested in applying to perform on the Gig Rig stage can find out more on www.fleadhcheoil.ie where an application form and eligibility criteria will be live until 31 January 2026. Other key venues announced which include the Ulster Hall and Waterfront Hall. These well-known performance settings will provide a stage for competitors from across the

world to perform in a range of competition categories. Viewed as the festival's pinnacle competition, the top-tier senior céili bands will compete in the ICC Belfast on the final Sunday of the event (9 August 2026). Scoil Éigse, another essential part of the Fleadh, will be held in the new Ulster University campus. This week of intensive tuition and fun-filled sessions helps young musicians learn from the genre's best musicians and teachers. The MAC, one of Belfast's leading contemporary arts spaces, will also feature as a venue. Plans are well underway

to deliver a vibrant Fleadh, working in partnership with cultural organisations and community groups, organisers are developing a programme of cultural events that will celebrate music, arts and heritage across the city including live music performances, family-friendly activities, and community-led initiatives. This will include the opportunity for Belfast residents to put forward their creative ideas for the Fleadh as part of the council's annual Bank of Ideas initiative, which will see successful suggestions supported by funding, if voted for by other citizens. With at least 800,000 visitors expected in the city this August, engagement sessions will take place between now and spring, inviting communities, businesses and cultural groups to come along and find out more about what's in store, how to get involved and how to plan ahead, including for road closures. Further information will be shared by Belfast City Council and its city and statutory partners when the detail is confirmed. Dates and times for the public and stakeholder information sessions will be made available on the council's website and social media channels. Volunteer Now are also recruiting for a range of volunteers, with full training provided. Details are available at www.fleadhcheoil.ie.

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Work underway on £5 million redevelopment of Cathedral Gardens

Belfast City Council aims to transform the area between St Anne’s Cathedral and Ulster University into a unique world class public space.

The revamped gardens will feature a large multi-use events space, a new memorial dedicated to the people who died during the Belfast Blitz, a play area inspired by nature and a kids’ interactive digital play zone.

It will include advanced lighting technology which can be programmed to illuminate the space in different colours, and a projection system which can cast images onto the walls of the adjacent Ulster University building.

A mix of mature trees, a lawn, plants and shrubs will bring green space to the city centre, with sustainability central to designs. Rainwater will be captured, stored and used to water all the planting within the gardens.

Welcoming the start of work, Belfast Lord Mayor Councillor Tracy Kelly said: “The



Cathedral Gardens regeneration project is both ambitious and innovative. Our aim to create a world class urban space where families, students, workers and visitors can meet, relax and be entertained all year round, both night and day.

“We also want the space to become an events and cultural hub, helping reinvigorate this part of the city centre which is undergoing a transformation. We

look forward to it hosting numerous small and large-scale events ranging from Culture Night, music concerts and children’s festivals, to food markets and much more besides, helping to support and boost the city’s annual cultural programme.

“This area was badly impacted by air raids during World War 2, so Cathedral Gardens will be a fitting home to a new Belfast Blitz Memorial - a space where people can pause,

reflect and honour those who lost their lives.”

The redevelopment of Cathedral Gardens is one of several multi-million-pound investments by Belfast City Council which aim to regenerate the city centre for the long-term benefit of city residents and the wider region.

Cathedral Gardens is expected to reopen in spring 2027.

For more information on the redevelopment visit belfastcity.gov.uk/cathedralgardens



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- The carefully planned, purposeful and highly effective integration opportunities provided across the deaf unit and mainstream classes impacts positively on the inclusion and learning experiences of the children.
- The enriching provision for deaf children is at the core of inclusion in this school.

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Could there be a new moveable active travel bridge across the River Lagan?

Global consulting engineer Arup and leading bridge designer Knight Architects will work with Eadon Consulting (mechanical and electrical engineering) and Cumming Group (cost consultancy) to deliver RIBA Stages 0-2, resulting in a preferred Sailortown Bridge option recommendation next year.

Chair of Belfast City Council’s City Growth and Regeneration Committee, Councillor Ian McLaughlin said: “Sailortown Bridge will help us achieve the Belfast Waterfront Framework’s vision of a better connected, more vibrant and more attractive corridor linking to and with key education, leisure, tourism and economic destinations, neighbourhood communities and the city centre.

“So we’re delighted to see this much-needed regeneration project moving forward, thanks to investment from the Department for Infrastructure. With this level of expertise on board, I’m confident that the resulting design concepts will be iconic, and that the bridge will encourage more people to walk, wheel and cycle to the many key destinations around the Harbour Loop along



both sides of the River Lagan.”

Héctor Beade, Design Director at Knight Architects, added: “The area’s shipbuilding history, unique waterfront setting, river navigation requirements, and modal shift opportunities all combine to make this a very exciting project. We are looking forward to getting

started with our integrated consultant team partners on this transformational scheme for the people of Belfast.”

Mike Mitchell, Project Director at Arup, said: “We are proud to be involved on this project that promises to make a pivotal contribution to Belfast’s active travel infrastructure, with a new link across

the River Lagan downstream of the existing Lagan Weir bridge. In connecting the historic Sailortown district with the Titanic Quarter via an opening bridge, the uninterrupted active travel corridor from the Lagan Gateway will be extended, whilst also providing stronger links to the recently upgraded York Street train station.”



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27 May 2027	Fjordland Landscapes & Nordic Traditions	11 Nights	£1,259pps
5 June 2027	Springtime Shores: Hebrides & Isle Of Man Discovery	8 Nights	£889pps
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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.

Hope cannot be scaled back.

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

THREE CORNERED GARLIC

A few years ago, I became aware of a roadside plant growing extensively in winter and carrying white flowers. It looked like wild garlic; it smelled like wild garlic; so, it must be wild garlic.

Wrong!!
Sadly, it's actually a blow-in, an alien invasive species, commonly called three-cornered garlic, a native of the Mediterranean area, and like so many other plants and animals was either introduced (as were rhododendrons, which are now a major problem in some of our forests) or brought in accidentally (which is presumably how the invasive zebra mussels found their way into Lough Neagh, contributing to its ecological collapse). The problem with alien

species is that they didn't evolve here and have no natural predators or limits to their spread. Some aliens may not thrive, but those that do can end up being a problem. One of the best (or worst) examples is American grey squirrels, introduced in the 1800s, which almost wiped out our red squirrels. Three-cornered garlic is just one more alien, which will probably continue to thrive, out-competing primroses and violets on roadsides and elsewhere. It's notoriously difficult to remove and

eradicate, and testament to its ability to spread and take over foreign parts is the fact that it's known as angled onion in Australia and onion weed in New Zealand; it's also in some areas of North and South America. While three-cornered garlic and our native wild garlic (sometimes called ramsons) are similar in appearance, they can be identified, particularly by their stems: the former has a ribbed stem which is concavely triangular when cut laterally (hence its common name).

Additionally, the natives are usually found in damp woodland, seldom on road verges, and flower much later, in April to June. These days, our gardens are full of imported flowering plant species, so to prevent their introduction to our wild places and becoming problem aliens, I ask that gardeners do not discard cultivated seed and plants in waste land, roadsides, parks and similar areas; just keep them in your garden to enjoy. Thank you.
JVA



The Rising Stars of Arenacross 2026 | Amateurs, Futures, Superminis & Minis

From fearless Minis to championship-chasing Futures, Arenacross 2026 shines a spotlight on the next generation of indoor motocross talent as young riders chase dreams, experience the pressure of the big stage and begin their journey under the lights.

Remember when you were young and shone like the sun? With dreams and ambitions of what and who you wanted to be and with that carefree attitude that youthful exuberance brings. If your memory is a bit cloudy, let the rising stars of Arenacross remind you. One of the many satisfying things and rewards of running the Arenacross

tour is giving some of the current generation of wannabee professional dirtbike racers a genuine platform to showcase their skill and ambition to the masses in the early part of what could potentially be their future career. Not only that, but they also get to share that journey and make memories that will last a lifetime with the thousands

of people in the arena and more importantly with their family and friends. Just give yourself a moment, and transport yourself back to being a kid and imagine how amazing it would be to out there in front of all of those fans and soaking up that atmosphere, especially if you were good enough to take the win and be called up to take your #1 plaque. What a buzz. Moments like that will inevitably inspire the next generation and make them more determined and focused for more.

Across the three youth classes in Arenacross 2026 (Minis, Superminis and Futures) you will see kids totally committed and leaving it all out on track. You'll also see plenty of mistakes and the occasional tears, but more than anything, you'll see kids expressing themselves and having fun and for us at Arenacross that's priceless.

If last year's racing is anything to go by, then

the 2026 youth class championships are going to be exciting, entertaining and hotly contested. The 2025 championship battle for the Futures class was one of the best yet. In the end it was Issac Ash who came out on top to add a Futures title to his Supermini success, but he won't be in contention to repeat that feat for 2026 as he's moving up the Amateur class. Last year's runner up Harry Lee pushed Issac all the way and will be starting as a firm favourite to follow in Issac's footsteps and add a Future's title to his 2024 Supermini win. Other notable title contenders will be Austin Beasty, who took his first Future's race win last year and Oliver Williams who will be moving up from the Supermini class where he took third in the championship last year.

One of the many satisfying things and rewards of running the Arenacross tour is giving some of the current generation of



wannabee professional dirtbike racers a genuine platform to showcase their skill and ambition to the masses in the early part of what could potentially be their future career. Not only that, but they also get to share that journey and make memories that will last a lifetime with the thousands of people in the arena and more importantly with their family and friends.

Just give yourself a moment, and transport yourself back to being a kid and imagine how amazing it would be to out there in front of all of those fans and soaking up that atmosphere, especially if you were good enough to take the win and be called up to take your #1 plaque. What a buzz. Moments like that will inevitably inspire the next generation and make them more determined and focused for more.

If last year's racing is anything to go by, then the 2026 youth class championships are going to be exciting, entertaining

and hotly contested. The 2025 championship battle for the Futures class was one of the best yet. In the end it was Issac Ash who came out on top to add a Futures title to his Supermini success, but he won't be in contention to repeat that feat for 2026 as he's moving up the Amateur class. Last year's runner up Harry Lee pushed Issac all the way and will be starting as a firm favourite to follow in Issac's footsteps and add a Future's title to his 2024 Supermini win. The Arenacross Tour is celebrating 25 years of bringing indoor motocross madness to The SSE Arena, Belfast on 13 and 14 February. Expect edge-of-your-seat racing, huge freestyle motocross shows, tight and intense signature Arenacross tracks, autograph sessions, lasers, lights and three hours of non-stop entertainment.

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Places are limited and applications may need to be prioritised. Whilst every effort will be taken to accommodate all enquiries, submitting an application does not guarantee a placement on the academy



Ready to take the next step?

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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.

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Let the coast call you back this winter.

Go All In Against Cancer at Race for Life Belfast

The Traitors star Leanne Quigley is urging people across Northern Ireland to kick-start the New Year by signing up for Cancer Research UK's Race for Life in Belfast.

The much-loved fundraising event will return to Stormont Estate on Sunday 24 May, offering 3k, 5k and 10k routes suitable for people of all ages and abilities.

To encourage early sign-ups, anyone who registers in January can claim 30 per cent off the entry fee using the code RFL26NY.

Around 10,700 people are diagnosed with cancer in Northern Ireland each year, and money raised through Race for Life helps fund vital research into preventing, detecting and treating the disease.

Leanne took part in Race for Life with her fiancée, Sophie Jones, after Sophie was diagnosed with breast cancer in July 2024. The couple led a team that raised more than £1,200 at a Pretty Muddy event last summer, marking the end of nearly a year of treatment. Now in remission, Sophie received chemotherapy and radiotherapy, including Herceptin – a drug developed through research led by Cancer Research UK scientists.

Leanne said: "I'm all in against cancer. Watching Sophie go through treatment was incredibly tough, but crossing the finish line together with our family and friends was unforgettable. Sophie is back at work, we're planning our wedding and our twin boys are about to turn three – there's so much to look forward to. We want to support Race for Life so others facing cancer can have that hope too."

Lisa Adams, Cancer Research UK's spokeswoman in Northern Ireland, said the charity is calling on communities to unite. "Nearly one in two of us will get cancer in our lifetime, but together we can power the research that will beat it. Race for Life is non-competitive – people can walk, jog or run at their own pace. What matters is showing up together."

Since 1994, more than 10 million people have taken part in Race for Life, helping fund decades of life-saving breakthroughs.

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Pat thought leaving a long-time family home meant giving something up. Instead, residents often discover they gain far more than they expected.

"I loved my house," said Pat, "but I felt, joy, peace and happiness at the new home I'd found".

Abbeyfield Belfast is part of a nationwide charity founded in 1956, offering supported sheltered housing for independent older people. Since 1960 it has helped residents across South and East Belfast stay connected to their communities while enjoying a home that suits their lifestyle.

Residents have their own private rooms or apartments, with

the reassurance that practical support is available 24/7 if needed. Freshly prepared meals, housekeeping and laundry help remove the everyday pressures that can make living alone a struggle, while still allowing people to live life on their own terms.

For many, the atmosphere is what matters most. "You can go back to your own room when you want quiet," a resident explains, "but there's always someone in the lounge for a cup of tea and a chat. I've made

more friends here than I had in years."

Communal dining rooms, gardens and shared lounges create opportunities to connect naturally, and activities are available for those who wish to join, with no pressure to participate.

As more people look to simplify their lives without losing their independence, Abbeyfield Belfast offers a reassuring alternative. It is not about giving things up – it is about choosing a lifestyle that is easier, safer and more social.



Over 1,000 Health Apps Available to Support Wellbeing This Winter

The Health Minister is encouraging people to make use of the Health and Social Care (HSC) App Library this festive period to help support their health and wellbeing.

With over 1,000 HSC-endorsed apps available, the library offers trusted information and guidance across a wide range of topics, including mental health, healthy ageing, general

and advice on staying well during the winter months. The apps can be downloaded on smartphones and tablets and accessed anytime, anywhere.

The Health Minister said it is especially important

to look after ourselves and one another, noting that winter can be a challenging time, particularly for those affected by cold weather, loneliness or increased stress. He encouraged people to explore the HSC App Library, which includes safe and trusted apps for both adults and children to support the management of a variety of health conditions.

He also highlighted the additional pressure currently facing HSC services, adding that taking small steps to improve physical and mental wellbeing can make a positive difference. The range of approved apps, he

said, offers something for everyone.

Dr Paul Rice, Chief Digital Information Officer in the Department of Health, said digital tools give people easy access to information, helping them better understand their conditions and take greater control of their health. He noted that whether it is managing stress, staying active during colder months or finding support to stop smoking, the library provides reliable, easy-to-understand resources.

The HSC App Library is managed by Digital Health and Care Northern

apps4healthcareni.hscni.net

Your Health App Finder

You are one click away from hundreds of apps that can help you with your health and wellbeing. All the apps in your Health App Library have been tested (assessed) by the Organisation for the Review of Care and Health Apps (ORCHA). Start browsing your Health App Library now by using the search bar.

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They are available to download 24 hours a day across 365 days of the year.

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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.

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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.

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Managed by LORAG, Shaftesbury Community and Recreation Centre, provides a welcoming Healthy Living Centre, offering a wide range of community services and opportunities for people of all ages with the aim of improving health outcomes.

LORAG works at the heart of the community, working with and for residents to support healthier, more connected living. As South Belfast's Healthy Living Centre, our focus is on promoting physical, mental, social and emotional wellbeing for all ages and abilities. Whatever your goals, LORAG has something to offer you.

Everything we do is shaped through listening to the community. The voices and experiences of people guide the services we provide, ensuring services are relevant, inclusive and enjoyable.

LORAG offers a wide range of gym and exercise class memberships, from circuit training to yoga and pilates, suitable for beginners, those more



experienced and those seeking a change. If you are looking to meet new people or try something different, our community garden and shed provide opportunities to take part in gardening and woodworking groups in a relaxed, social environment.

Or get out and about with our walking and running groups. The development of a new healthy living hub complete with river access, set to be completed for Spring 2027 promises to take health and wellbeing to an even higher level.

If you are living with a chronic condition, you can speak to your GP about gaining access to the Healthwise physical referral scheme delivered at Shaftesbury, giving you access to three months of free gym use and exercise classes.

Whether you prefer to exercise independently, with a friend, or with others, LORAG has facilities to suit you. Use our fitness suite, train together in circuit classes, or enjoy team sports on our state-of-the-art 3G pitch. As a community-focused organisation, LORAG offers flexible membership options to suit different needs, including student memberships from just £20 per month. For those planning to commit longer term, our multi-month memberships offer great value, with one month free when you purchase an annual membership.

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Taekwon-Do Northern Ireland, under the esteemed leadership of Master Leo Maguire, is a prominent force in the martial arts community, shaping the lives of children and adults across the province.

Master Maguire, a VI Degree Black Belt and President of the International Taekwon-Do Federation Northern Ireland (ITF N.I.), has established a network of schools dedicated to fostering confidence, discipline, and self-defense. His distinguished career as a national coach has led the Northern Ireland team to numerous medal victories at both national and international competitions.

The Taekwon-Do Northern Ireland schools offer a comprehensive program tailored to all ages, beginning with the "Little Tiger Cubs" for children aged 3 to 5. This "Learn Through Play" program introduces basic martial arts skills through a fun mixture of games and fitness drills, helping children develop improved balance,

coordination, and respect. For slightly older children, the "Active Tigers" class (ages 5 to 8) allows students to develop their Taekwon-Do skills at a more relaxed pace. The core "Tae-Kwon Do" program, for students aged 9 to adult, is designed to be safe, practical, and fun. It focuses on the fundamental tenets of the art, including self-defense and self-discipline, while building confidence and physical fitness.

The organization's commitment to excellence was recently highlighted when Lisburn hosted the prestigious 2024 ITF Taekwon-Do Championships at the National Badminton Centre. The historic one-day event brought together Grandmasters, Masters, instructors, and competitors of all ages



for a spectacular display of skill and spirit. Master Maguire, as President of Taekwon-Do Northern Ireland, was instrumental in bringing the event to the region.

Taekwon-Do NI is also very excited to announce that they are working towards sponsorship and

fundraising for a trip to the World Championships that are taking place at the end of October 2026 in Mexico! This is going to be an amazing life changing experience for the Squad and all involved with it!

With a wide range of classes available across

Northern Ireland, anyone interested in experiencing the benefits of Taekwon-Do can easily get involved. To find a full list of classes and begin your journey, visit the official website at www.taekwondo-ni.co.uk or contact Leo Maguire directly at 07891 191494.

Pharmacy campaign to support mental health

A new campaign has been launched in community pharmacies across Northern Ireland, encouraging people to look after their mental health and wellbeing.

Running throughout December and January, the campaign encourages people to ask themselves and others a simple but powerful question: "How are you feeling?". The campaign encourages people to check in with themselves and others, turning a common greeting into a meaningful opportunity to support mental health.

The campaign is running in over 500 community pharmacies as part of the Living Well service, with pharmacy teams supporting people to look after their mental health. Living Well is delivered in partnership

with the Public Health Agency (PHA), Community Pharmacy NI (CPNI), and the Department of Health (DoH).

Using the Take 5 steps to wellbeing – Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning and Give – the campaign promotes everyday actions that can help people feel more positive and better equipped to manage life's challenges.

Clodagh Crowe, Health and Social Wellbeing Senior Improvement Officer at the PHA, said: "Mental health is just as important as physical health, and looking after it is not something we should

only do when we are feeling down. Research tells us that someone who practises all five steps daily feels higher levels of wellbeing, and they are things that we can incorporate in to our everyday routine which are simple, practical and proven to make a difference.

"In Northern Ireland, a fifth of adults have mental ill-health at any one time and we want everyone to know that support is available. Community pharmacies are trusted spaces where people feel comfortable and this campaign gives them the tools to start meaningful conversations."

Pharmacies will display posters, leaflets, and staff will start conversations to help the public reflect on their mental health and direct people to further support, including local services, apps, and professional help.

Patrick McCallion, Champion Pharmacist at Bradley's Pharmacy in Claudy, said:

"We see people every day who may be struggling

quietly with their mental health. This campaign gives us a practical and approachable way to start conversations, share simple tools and offer support in a non-judgemental space. Community pharmacies are another trusted source of advice and support."

The campaign also encourages pharmacy teams to look after their own mental health, with ideas like mini-workshops, self-care challenges, and wellbeing resources for staff.

Next time you visit your local community pharmacy, look out for the campaign displays and pick up a 'How are you feeling?' leaflet for advice on looking after your mental health.

For more information and mental health resources, visit www.pha.site/living-well or www.mindingyourhead.info

For anyone in a crisis, Lifeline is available 24/7, call 0808 808 8000 or visit www.lifelinehelpline.info/i-need-help

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GOLF GTI EDITION 50

Exclusive anniversary model offers outstanding driving dynamics and numerous design highlights

In 2026, the Golf GTI2 will celebrate its 50th anniversary, and the brand is marking this special event with this outstanding special model. With an output of 239 kW (325 PS), the Golf GTI EDITION 50 is going down in history as the most powerful production Golf GTI to date.

The Golf GTI is one of the most successful compact sports cars in the world. More than 2.5 million units have been produced worldwide to date.

Volkswagen is equipping the special model with a 2.0-litre turbocharged engine – a modification of the drive unit from the Golf GTI Clubsport4 with 221 kW (300 PS). Thanks to internal engine measures, the Volkswagen engine team have succeeded in increasing the output of the Golf GTI EDITION 50 to 239 kW (325 PS) – compared with the classic Golf GTI2 in the basic configuration with 195 kW (265 PS), this is an additional 44 kW (60 PS). The maximum torque of the EDITION 50 has been increased to 420 Nm. In comparison, the Golf GTI Clubsport has a maximum torque of 400 Nm, while the



Golf GTI produces 370 Nm. The chassis of the Golf GTI EDITION 50 has been further refined and adapted to the higher power. A MacPherson front axle and a four-link rear axle form the basic layout. Overall, the anniversary model is 15 mm lower than the basic configuration.

The Golf GTI EDITION 50 boasts numerous highlights inside and out. Combined with the red seat belts, the sporty seats with check pattern, a line in Racing Green and synthetic velour elements create a high-quality ambience with a motorsport touch. The newly designed

multifunction leather sports steering wheel features trim with the GTI 50 logo. Together with the integrated shift paddles for the seven-speed DSG, it offers a real motorsport feeling. The seats and steering wheel are thus the interfaces to the exceptional chassis and engine of the Golf GTI EDITION 50.

On the exterior, the GTI 50 logo is placed on the roof spoiler and the insides of the exterior mirrors. Other exclusive features include special trim on the door sills, a roof with black paintwork, black exterior mirror housings and black tailpipe trims on the exhaust

system. A striking side stripe on the side members with a colour gradient from black to Tornado red additionally underlines the sporty character of the vehicle.

Five exterior colours are planned for the Golf GTI Edition 50: in addition to the characteristic Pure white, these are Moonstone grey, Grenadilla black metallic and – exclusively for the anniversary model – Dark Moss green metallic and Tornado red. Tornado red is the colour that has been synonymous with high-performance Volkswagen vehicles over the decades since 1986.

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 removable 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.

Thousands of lives to be saved under bold new Road Safety Strategy

New road safety strategy shows that the government is listening and leading: together, we can build a safer future for all UK road users.

The first road safety strategy in more than a decade will save thousands of lives on the nation’s roads by tackling drink driving, improving training for young drivers and introducing mandatory eye tests for older motorists.

Launched today (7 January 2026), the strategy sets out an ambitious plan to reduce deaths and serious injuries on Britain’s roads by 65% by 2035, with an even more stretching target of 70% for children under 16.

Approximately 4 people die on Britain’s roads every day, with thousands more seriously injured each year, but through targeted action on speeding, drink and drug driving, not wearing seat belts and mobile phone use, thousands of these tragedies can be prevented.

The government will consult on lowering the drink drive limit in England and Wales, which has remained unchanged since 1967 and is currently the highest in Europe.

In 2023, 1 in 6 road fatalities involved drink driving, but a consultation

will explore the use of preventative technology, such as alcohol interlock devices and new powers to suspend driving licences for those suspected of drink or drug driving offences.

This could mean that, in future, some drink drive offenders might be required to have one of these devices fitted to their vehicle as a condition of being allowed to drive again.

Inexperience behind the wheel is costing lives. Drivers aged 17 to 24 represent just 6% of licence holders but are involved in 24% of fatal and serious collisions. To address this, the government will consult on introducing a 3 or 6-month minimum learning period, giving learner drivers more time to develop their skills in varied conditions, such as night driving, adverse weather and heavy traffic.

With the number of older drivers continuing to rise as Britain’s population ages, a consultation on mandatory eyesight testing for those over 70 will be launched, while options for cognitive testing will also be



developed to protect all road users.

New measures will also target the growing problem of illegal number plates, including ‘ghost’ plates designed to fool camera systems, while also cracking down on uninsured drivers and vehicles without a valid MOT.

Secretary of State for Transport, Heidi Alexander, said:

Every life lost on our roads is a tragedy that devastates families and communities. For too long, progress on road safety has stalled. This strategy marks

a turning point.

We are taking decisive action to make our roads safer for everyone, from new drivers taking their first lessons to older motorists wanting to maintain their independence. The measures we are announcing today will save thousands of lives over the coming decade.

Local Transport Minister, Lilian Greenwood, said:

Our vision with this ambitious road safety strategy is clear: to ensure that people can travel safely on our roads however they choose.

RAC road safety

spokesperson, Rod Dennis, said:

We’ve long said the dial needs to be turned up when it comes to reducing road casualties, so we warmly welcome this strategy – and especially the reintroduction of casualty reduction targets, that were scrapped 16 years ago.

The simple truth is that this strategy can’t come soon enough. Britain might have some of the safest roads by international standards, but on average, 4 people are still killed and 76 seriously injured every single day. That’s an unacceptable number of

lives being ruined or cut short.

The strategy addresses many areas we know drivers are concerned about, including drink and drug-driving, ‘ghost’ plates and dazzling headlights. The inclusion of a commitment to consult on the use of alcohol interlocks for convicted drink-drivers – which are internationally proven to save lives – is particularly encouraging, especially given the extent to which drivers are supportive of their use. It’s also positive to see proposals on the table for both improving

young driver safety and tackling the scourge of uninsured drivers who push up motor insurance costs for everyone.

It’s important to remember that the ultimate success of any new or updated penalties or laws will depend on awareness among drivers and enforcement. But undoubtedly, this strategy is a real chance to give the whole topic of road safety the focus and public attention it deserves. What we need now is for it to quickly evolve into a set of concrete actions that make the roads safer for everyone.



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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.

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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.



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What to grow on your windowsill this month

While February often feels like the depths of winter, the increasing daylight makes it the perfect time to start a “windowsill farm.”

.” You don’t need a greenhouse or a massive backyard to start producing food; a south-facing ledge and a few pots are all it takes to get a head start on spring.

Here is your guide to what you can successfully grow on your windowsill this month.

High-Speed Microgreens Microgreens are the “instant gratification” of the gardening world.1 Since you harvest them at the seedling stage, they don’t require deep soil or intense summer heat.

- **Best Varieties:** Radish (spicy), Broccoli (mild), Pea shoots (sweet), and Mustard greens.

- **Harvest Time:** 7–14 days.

- **Top Tip:** Use a shallow container (like a recycled take-out box) and sow seeds thickly on the surface of the soil.2

Hardy Culinary Herbs Like basil might struggle without a heat mat in February, hardy perennials and cool-season herbs will thrive.

- **Chives:** These are incredibly resilient and will grow quickly from seed or a divided clump from a garden.3

- **Mint:** Warning—it grows like a weed! Keep it in its own pot so it doesn’t take over.

- **Parsley:** A bit slower to germinate, but once it starts, it will provide fresh garnishes all through spring.

“Cut and Come Again” Salad Leaves

You can grow baby leaf salads quite easily in a long, narrow trough on a windowsill.

- **Loose-leaf Lettuce:** Varieties like ‘Lollo Rosso’ or ‘Red Salad Bowl’ handle the lower light levels of February better than head-forming lettuces.

- **Arugula (Rocket):** This peppery green loves the cooler temperatures of a windowsill near a window pane.

- **Harvesting:** Only snip the outer leaves, leaving the center “heart” to continue growing.

Alliums from Scraps February is the perfect time to try “regrowing” kitchen scraps. It’s free, sustainable, and educational if you have kids.

- **Scallions (Green Onions):** Place the white root ends in a small glass of water. They will regrow green tops in less than a week.

- **Garlic Greens:** Plant a clove of garlic that has started to sprout in a small pot of soil. You won’t get a new bulb, but the green shoots taste like a cross between garlic and chives.

In order to maximise daylight - use a south-facing window if possible. Rotate your pots 180° every few days so the plants don’t lean too far in one direction.

At night, temperatures near the glass can drop

significantly. Move your plants a few inches away from the pane or close the curtains behind them.

Indoor heating can dry out small pots quickly. Mist your plants occasionally or set them on a tray of pebbles with a little water.

Why Start Now?

Growing on a windowsill in February isn’t just about the food; it’s about the mental boost. Seeing vibrant green shoots against

a grey winter backdrop is a powerful reminder that

spring is just around the corner.

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