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Berlin-born artist Ralf Sander and his daughter Naomi Sander were among those revealing details of a new memorial planned to commemorate the 85th Anniversary of the Belfast Blitz in Cathedral Gardens.

STRIKING DESIGNS REVEALED FOR BELFAST BLITZ WAR MEMORIAL

Striking designs for the Belfast Blitz Memorial have been revealed by acclaimed Berlin-born artist Ralf Sander, and his daughter Naomi Sander, ahead of the 85th anniversary of the tragic events.

The result of a partnership between Belfast City Council and The Northern Ireland War Memorial Museum (NIWM), the planned memorial will be located in Cathedral Gardens, the area between St Anne's Cathedral and Ulster University's Belfast

campus which is currently undergoing a £5 million transformation into a world-class public space. It is anticipated that the Memorial will be unveiled in spring 2027, when the revamped Cathedral Gardens open, featuring a large multi-use events space, a play area inspired

by nature and a kids' interactive digital play zone. The memorial designs were created following a lengthy period of intensive research by artist duo Ralf Sander and his daughter Naomi Sander. Thanks to their creative vision, visitors to the memorial

will see themselves reflected in an historical image of the bombed-out Belfast International Bar, which once stood on the site of the planned artwork, powerfully connecting past and present.

Continued on page 4

Views sought on City extending Sunday trading hours

Belfast City Council is asking for feedback from residents, visitors and business representatives on extending Sunday trading hours across the city during periods of high tourist and visitor numbers.

Under the Shops (Sunday Trading &c.) (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 - the NI-wide legislation which sets out the rules by which shops can open on Sundays - only areas which have designated themselves as 'holiday resorts' can give the green light for larger stores (those with floor space of more than 280 square metres) to open at any time on up to 18 Sundays between 1 March and 30 September each year (excluding Easter Sunday). Belfast is not designated as a 'holiday resort' at present - meaning large shops are only currently permitted to open from 1pm

to 6pm on Sundays. Smaller stores (those less than 280 square metres) do not have to follow these restrictions and are already free to set their own opening hours. In July 2025, elected members agreed, in principle, to introduce the holiday resort designation across the full Belfast council area, subject to public consultation. The consultation is now open for feedback, with views welcome by Wednesday 13 May 2026, via the council's Your Say Belfast engagement platform at yoursay.belfastcity.gov.uk/sunday-openings

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Further Park improvements planned for Belfast

Two revamped playgrounds were ready for play this Easter, following improvement works by Belfast City Council.

White Rise and Ohio Street playgrounds have both been transformed through this year's £580,000 Playground Improvement Programme and are now open for use to children and families, while works are currently progressing at Finvoy Street and are due to commence soon at Roddens Crescent.



White Rise, at Lagmore, features a varied selection of fun play equipment which provides lots of different play opportunities for children of all ages and abilities, alongside new safety surfacing, fencing and landscaping. The inclusion of sensory-friendly acoustic equipment, a communication panel and wheelchair-accessible features ensures the space is welcoming and supportive for all children, including those with sensory processing differences.

The annual programme of upgrades moves beyond traditional play and, on World Autism Awareness Day, council highlighted how the addition of sensory-friendly equipment helps children of all abilities and neurotypes enjoy our city's outdoor spaces.

Since 2012, the council's refurbishment programme has helped improve the safety, quality and accessibility of outdoor play parks across Belfast ensuring our playground are safe and fun for every child.

In addition to a further £580,000 set aside for more playpark upgrades in the next financial year, councillors have also agreed to invest £1.5 million into a Parks Improvement Programme over the next two years. Among the projects due to be delivered are new water refill points at ten sites across the city, three new dog run areas, new benches and a range of maintenance works, including new handrails, fencing and gates at specific sites.

A rolling programme of improvements to bridges within the city's parks has also been agreed – worth £240,000 annually – which will see remedial works carried out on 50+ bridges across the city's parklands.

new dog run areas, new benches and a range of maintenance works, including new handrails, fencing and gates at specific sites.

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Continued from page 1

A large bronze relief based on photographs of Belfast taken during and after the Blitz will also incorporate details and references to the historical events, with a specific focus on the people of Belfast.

Artist Ralf Sander explains: "Our artwork tells many stories simultaneously, forming a timeless narrative in a single image against the backdrop of the city centre which became smouldering rubble. Ultimately, it depicts the humanity and solidarity of Belfast's people in the face of a merciless war machine."

"My daughter Naomi and I sculpted the figures over the period of more than a year. And whilst we found it emotionally demanding to engage with images of so much human suffering over such a protracted period, we are deeply grateful and honoured that our design will

commemorate all those who lost their lives in the Belfast Blitz. This city has also become our city."

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.

These include Belfast Stories, a new public space, visitor attraction and creative hub which will open on Royal Avenue in 2030, with funding from the Belfast Region City Deal programme of investment, planned refurbishment of the historic Assembly Rooms, and a partnership with GRAHAM to deliver £280m worth of residential-led, mixed use city centre developments.

For more information on the Cathedral Gardens redevelopment and the Belfast Blitz memorial, go to www.belfastcity.gov.uk/cathedralgardens

BELFAST LOUGH SET TO COME ALIVE WITH GP14 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS 2026

Belfast Lough is set to come alive with over 100 boats from across the world as the spectacular GP14 World Championships sail into Northern Ireland in August 2026 - promising a week-long celebration of world-class racing, coastal energy and true regatta spirit.

Hosted by the Royal North of Ireland Yacht Club, and supported by Ards and North Down Borough Council, the championship will take place from 8th to 14th August 2026, welcoming elite sailors, families and supporters from across the globe to one of the UK and Ireland's most iconic sailing waters.

Such is the demand for the event, entries sold out in record time, with a waiting list now in place - a clear reflection of both the global popularity of the GP14 class and the appeal of Belfast Lough as a premier sailing destination. Competitors will range in age from just 14 to over 80 years old, showcasing the unique inclusivity and lifelong

appeal of the sport.

From colourful sails lining the horizon to the buzz of crews preparing dockside, Belfast Lough and Holywood town, will transform into a vibrant international Regatta - a showcase not just of competitive sailing, but of Northern Ireland's warm hospitality, stunning coastline and proud maritime heritage.

Lindsay Nolan, Commodore of the Royal North of Ireland Yacht Club, said: "We are incredibly proud to bring the GP14 World Championships to Belfast Lough in 2026."

"This event will be a true celebration of sailing - not just for our club, but for Northern Ireland as a whole. We're looking forward to

welcoming competitors and visitors from around the world and giving them an unforgettable experience both on and off the water."

Beyond the racing, the event is expected to deliver a significant boost to local tourism and the wider economy, with visitors exploring everything from seaside towns and coastal walks to the vibrant culture and hospitality of the region.

With a packed schedule of racing, social events and onshore celebrations planned, the GP14 World Championships 2026 will be more than a sporting event - it will be a moment for Northern Ireland to shine on the global stage.

Further announcements, including event highlights



Gerry Reid, Event Director at Royal North of Ireland Yacht Club is pictured with Cllr Gillian McCollum, Mayor of Ards and North Down Borough Council and Lindsay Nolan, Commodore RNIYC.

and visitor information, will be released in the coming months.

Keep up to date with event timings or if you would like to offer your volunteer

services visit - <https://rniyc.org> manager@rniyc.org Tel: +44 (0)28 9042 8041

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Opportunities for businesses and independent traders at Fleadh Cheoil

Belfast City Council has highlighted a range of upcoming opportunities for local businesses and independent traders at this summer's Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann.

With over 800,000 people expected to enjoy the world's largest celebration

of Irish music and culture from Sunday 2 to Sunday 9 August 2026, a dedicated Food Village in the grounds of St Anne's Cathedral will

offer visitors from around the world a flavour of the city's thriving food scene and high-quality local produce, as they refuel and

relax between competitions, sessions and events.

Recruitment of food and drink traders, managed by the appointed operator, will



open shortly. Details will be available from the council website and social media channels, as well as industry partners.

St George's Market has also been confirmed as opening for the duration of the festival (10am to 5pm Monday 3 to Wednesday 5 August, 10am to 10pm Thursday 6 to Sunday 9 August). It will offer live traditional music, food and craft stalls and accessible seating, as well as additional space for traders in neighbouring Verner Street (10am to 10pm, Thursday 6 to Sunday 9 August).

Stalls will be offered to existing traders at the market, with an open call to fill any remaining spaces.

Opportunities will be advertised via the council's website and social media channels in May.

A limited number of temporary street trading opportunities are also planned for three streets in the heart of the proposed pedestrianised area in Belfast city centre, at High Street, Bridge Street and Royal Avenue.

Businesses, vendors and entrepreneurs can apply online at belfastcity.gov.uk/fleadh until Friday 29 May.

Sites will be available on each day of the festival for vendors selling arts and crafts, artisan products, high-quality souvenirs and a limited amount of food and soft drinks.

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Lyons invests £200,000 for repairs to Northern Ireland's historic churches

Communities Minister Gordon Lyons has announced £200,000 in funding towards the long term sustainability of Northern Ireland's historic church buildings.

The funding will be administered by the National Churches Trust (NCT) to help address a range of urgent structural and fabric repairs at four church buildings.

Minister Lyons said: "Since 2018 my Department has supported the National Churches Trust via the Historic Environment Fund and through Covid recovery funding. The work of the NCT has been vital for places of worship in Northern Ireland, ensuring that these important buildings are cared for long into the future."

"I am pleased to be able to announce further support of £200,000 from my Department for this year's grant programme."

The churches that will receive support are: Mount Merrion Parish Church (CoI), Belfast; Bloomfield Presbyterian Church, Belfast; Whiteabbey Presbyterian Church, Newtownabbey; and Seymour Street Methodist Church, Lisburn.

Claire Walker, Chief Executive of the National Churches Trust, said: "We are deeply grateful to the Department and Minister not



Communities Minister Gordon Lyons (centre) pictured with (l-r) Kerry Rooney, National Churches Trust and Richard McChesney, Whiteabbey Presbyterian Church as the Minister announced £200,000 in funding towards the long term sustainability of Northern Ireland's historic church buildings

only for this funding, but for their continued partnership and support over the past eight years, which has made a real and lasting difference to places of worship and the communities they serve.

"These grants will fund essential works to safeguard four historic buildings, helping to keep these churches open, safe and welcoming. Each project reflects the dedication of local congregations and

volunteers who work tirelessly to care for these important spaces.

"The National Churches Trust remains committed to supporting churches across Northern Ireland, and we look forward to continuing this work through our Medium and Large Grants programmes, helping even more places of worship to thrive at the heart of their communities."

Further information on

these grant schemes and on other sources of heritage funding is available at <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/topics/historic-environment/historic-environment-funding-grants>

Further information on the National Churches Trust's work in Northern Ireland including events and advice on maintenance is available at <https://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/support-northern-ireland>.

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Translink fares frozen

Infrastructure Minister Liz Kimmins has confirmed that Translink fares will remain unchanged for a second year in a row, despite significant financial pressures across the public transport system.

The decision comes at a time when households are facing rising fuel and living costs and when public transport continues to play a vital role in helping people get to work, education and essential services.

Minister Kimmins said: "In the current context of rising fuel and oil prices, I do not believe it would be right to increase public transport fares and place further pressure on workers and families. Many people rely on buses and trains every day and keeping fares stable helps provide some certainty at a very challenging time."

The Minister acknowledged that the

decision was taken against a difficult funding backdrop: "I am fully aware of the financial pressures facing Translink and the wider public sector. This is an extremely constrained budget environment and there are no easy choices. Freezing fares for a second year has required careful consideration."

Minister Kimmins also stressed that she will continue to engage closely with Translink as the financial situation evolves. She said: "I will keep working with Translink to manage these pressures responsibly and to ensure the best possible services within the funding available."

PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION EXPLORING IDENTITY, BELONGING, AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

Communities Minister Gordon Lyons has launched a landmark photography exhibition exploring identity, belonging, and cultural heritage in Northern Ireland at the Belfast Exposed gallery.

The BIEN (British? Irish? Either? Neither?) programme of exhibitions at the Belfast Exposed gallery has been developed in partnership with the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression (OICE).

OICE and Belfast Exposed will deliver an accompanying programme of readings, performances and talks.

The Minister said: "I am pleased to launch this exhibition today. Photography is an art form that has a unique role to play in how communities, identity and culture is recorded. "These three

interconnected exhibitions provide us with an opportunity to bring together a diverse range of artists and subjects, all of whom are proud to call Northern Ireland home.

"This is exactly the kind of initiative that enables us to celebrate together the diversity that makes Northern Ireland a welcoming place for everyone. I encourage everyone to come along and see it for themselves."

Dr Katy Radford, Director of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression said: "The Office is delighted to work with others who see culture and heritage as ways to celebrate

being from Northern Ireland. We exist to promote a positive sense of belonging and community cohesion providing opportunities to celebrate together, in an open and respectful manner."

Deirdre Robb, Chief Executive of Belfast Exposed, added: "For over forty years Belfast Exposed has created a space where photography can explore the social and cultural realities of Northern Ireland. BIEN continues that tradition by bringing together artists whose work reflects the diversity of identities that shape our society today. Each artist approaches the



Communities Minister Gordon Lyons (centre) pictured with Dr Katy Radford, Director of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression (OICE) (L) and Deirdre Robb, Chief Executive, Belfast Exposed (R) at the opening of BIEN — British? Irish? Either? Neither?.

question of identity from a different perspective — through language, heritage, landscape, memory and lived experience. "What unites

them is a belief in photography's power to help us see one another more clearly. We are honoured to partner with OICE on a project that opens up new

conversations about who we are, and how we understand each other."

For more information visit: <https://www.belfastexposed.org/>

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'Rail Cool Rules' for Schools

Translink has partnered with Rail Safe Friendly, an accredited UK-wide programme, to help spread the vital message of rail safety in Northern Ireland. The new partnership also marks the launch of a new 'Rail Cool Rules' (RCR) campaign created by Translink and targeting P7 pupils.

With the primary aim of keeping young people safe when using or near

the railway, the campaign brings rail safety to life through an animation

video featuring Translink NI Railways employees plus engaging classroom activities.

The resources are now available for local primary schools to use in the classroom and cover the following 8 key topics: Platform Safety, Yellow Lines, Getting On & Off Services, Objects On Tracks, Respect, Level Crossings, Construction Sites and Train Speed.

Stuart Heaton, Managing Director of Learn Live and Rail Safe Friendly, marked the milestone by saying:

"We're delighted to welcome Translink to the Rail Safe Friendly programme. This partnership reflects the rail industry's shared commitment to making railway safety education accessible to young



New Translink rail safety campaign targets P7 audience with support from UK-wide 'Rail Safe Friendly' programme

people nationwide. We're excited to have Translink involved and look forward to continuing our work to help protect young people from the risks of railway trespass."

Oakwood Integrated Primary School in

Belfast is the first school in Northern Ireland to use Translink's Rail Cool Rules resources to complete the Rail Safe Friendly Programme and receive its Gold standard accreditation. Teacher Maria McKenna said:

"Our pupils enjoyed exploring the topic of rail safety using the Translink video resource and quiz activity to inspire further conversation about this important subject. Our school is situated near the railway line and

'Rail Cool Rules' is a quick and engaging way to raise awareness about safe and responsible behaviour when using train services, especially as pupils prepare to head into secondary level education. We would recommend other schools take part in the new campaign and bring rail safety into the classroom."

For further information visit www.translink.co.uk/railcoolrules and follow Translink socials #RailCoolRules.

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Plans for Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann revealed

Belfast City Council has set out proposals to keep the city moving during the upcoming Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann as the size and scale of this summer's event begins to take shape.

An estimated 800,000 people are expected to descend on Belfast from 2-9 August, as the city welcomes the world's biggest celebration of Irish music and culture for the first time.

The heart of the action will be in Belfast city centre, where all roads and streets will be closed to vehicle traffic for the duration of the Fleadh, either in full or partially – ensuring pedestrian safety and supporting the open air, vibrant atmosphere synonymous with the event.

The proposed closures will be in place from 6am on Sunday 2 August to 5am on Monday 10 August, with the biggest footfall expected from Thursday 6 August onwards.

The area around City Hall – which will host the Gig Rig main stage – will adopt phased closures to support the increased use of public transport in and out of the city centre.

There may also be limited closures of some roads as part of the build or takedown of event infrastructure, either before (Thursday 30 July to Saturday 1 August) or after (Monday 10 to Wednesday 12 August).

Fleadh Cheoil – co-hosted



with Comhaltas and Ards CCÉ – will also stretch out beyond the city centre and into local neighbourhoods, bringing together venues, outdoor spaces, vacant land and other locations right across the city.

To encourage visitors to stay longer and boost the economic success of the Fleadh, several temporary campsites will be in place to enhance accommodation provision.

Confirmed locations include Ormeau Park (proposed campsite for

Titanic Quarter (proposed campsite for motorhomes and caravans) and Falls Park (additional campsite for tents).

This will be the first time Belfast has welcomed Fleadh Cheoil, with organisers Comhaltas recently announcing the event will also return to the city again in August 2027.

Headline acts for the opening day have been confirmed, with Sharon Shannon, Goitse and Blackwater Céilí Band joining pipe bands and

school choirs for a multi-generational, cross-community showcase.

The free concert outside City Hall will set the tone for a jam-packed week of street performances, pub sessions, competitions, céilí and marching bands and a fringe programme of family-friendly activities.

To keep updated on all the latest Fleadh Cheoil event news, visit fleadhcheoil.ie or follow the council's social media channels - @belfastcitycouncil on Facebook and Instagram.



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Founded by owner and lead practitioner Sophie Christie, the clinic is fully RQIA regulated, ensuring that every client receives the highest standard of medical-grade care in a safe, welcoming, and judgment-free environment.



April is Rosacea Awareness Month — Rosacea can affect confidence just as much as complexion, but the good news is that our Candela gentle max pro laser offers real results. By targeting visible redness, broken capillaries, and inflammation, laser can calm the skin, strengthen the barrier, and restore a more even, confident glow. If rosacea is part of your story, you're not alone — and you don't have to navigate it without support. This month is the perfect time to learn what's possible with gentle, evidence based care. **If rosacea is something that affects you or someone you know, then get it touch to find out how we can help and support your skin journey**

The clinic offers a comprehensive suite of services designed to address a variety of concerns. These include laser hair removal, tattoo removal, carbon facials, and SPMU (Semi-Permanent Makeup) removal. Omorphia is particularly noted for its inclusive approach; transgender and PCOS (Polycystic Ovary Syndrome) recognizing the significant impact these procedures can have on a person's confidence and quality of life.

Quote SSA 192 on booking for 10% OFF ALL treatments!

Beyond laser technology, the clinic utilizes advanced Cryopen therapy for the removal of warts and skin tags, and offers micro-needling to target wrinkles and pigmentation. As an exclusive stockist of the award-winning vegan skincare range Pestle & Mortar, Sophie also provides personalized consultations to help clients find the perfect facial routine for their unique skin type.

SHOPMOBILITY BELFAST: YOUR KEY TO INDEPENDENT CITY EXPLORATION

Empowering Mobility in Belfast

Shopmobility Belfast is a registered charity dedicated to making Belfast City Centre and its surrounding areas more accessible to individuals with mobility challenges. By providing free daily rentals of mobility scooters and wheelchairs, the organisation ensures that people with disabilities or mobility difficulties can enjoy the city without barriers to shop, attend appointments, meet friends

and connect with their community.

Julie Guilar, Director of Shopmobility Belfast, emphasises the importance of their service:

“By utilising mobility scooters and wheelchairs, our unique and specialised service is vital to help people with disabilities or mobility difficulties access Belfast City Centre and beyond with greater freedom, independence, and

dignity.”

Services Offered

- **Mobility Equipment Hire:** A wide range of mobility scooters and wheelchairs are available for both short-term and long-term use;
- **Accessibility Advocacy:** Shopmobility Belfast collaborates with businesses and organisations to enhance accessibility throughout the city, ensuring smoother experiences for

individuals with mobility needs;

- **Training and Support:** Users receive training and support from experienced staff, helping them operate the equipment with confidence;
- **Outreach Programs:** The charity works with community groups to raise awareness about mobility issues and promote inclusive practices.

• **Repair and Servicing:** If you have your own mobility equipment Shopmobility Belfast can now service, maintain and make repairs, test and fit new batteries etc. As an established charity we guarantee to offer the best prices available.

Benefits of Using Shopmobility Belfast

- **Independence:** Explore Belfast City Centre and surrounding areas at your own pace;
- **Accessibility:** Easily access shops, restaurants, attractions, and public transportation, overcoming physical barriers;
- **Cost-Effective:** Take advantage of the free daily rental of high-quality mobility equipment and low-cost repairs and maintenance costs for your own equipment;

• **Support:** Receive expert guidance and assistance from the Shopmobility team.

How to Access the Service Membership with Shopmobility Belfast is free and open to anyone with mobility difficulties, regardless of age or disability status. To become a member, you can register in person at one of their locations, on-line or by contacting them directly.

Locations Shopmobility Belfast operates from multiple convenient locations across Belfast City Centre and the surrounding areas.

Contact Information For more details, to register as a member, or to check equipment availability, visit their website or contact them directly:

- **Website:** shopmobilitybelfast.co.uk
 - **Phone:** 028 9080 8090 (Great Northern Mall)
 - **Email:** info@shopmobilitybelfast.co.uk
- Shopmobility Belfast is a vital resource for those with mobility challenges, enabling full participation in community life and ensuring that everyone can enjoy all that Belfast has to offer.

Carlisle House Substance Use Rehab Treatment Centre

For over three decades, Carlisle House has stood as a beacon of hope for individuals navigating the complexities of substance misuse.

Established in 1992, this residential treatment centre provides a sanctuary for those seeking to build a life free from dependency.

At its core, Carlisle House employs a strength-based model, prioritizing respect, dignity, and compassion. Unlike traditional clinical settings, Carlisle House treatment programme is rooted in systemic practice, which focuses on people's strengths, their expertise, and locates the problems of substance use within the wider contexts of family, communities and society. We view recovery as a collaborative journey with peers and staff. This approach of itself challenges blame and stigma.

In employing the above model, we offer a comprehensive therapeutic programme that integrates a diverse range of evidence-based interventions including Individual & Group Therapy, Family Therapy, Creative & Art Therapies, Eco-Therapy and Pharmacological Support.

Beyond its primary

residential treatment, Carlisle House extends its support through supported accommodation in North Belfast, to ensure that the transition back into independent living is met with the necessary structure and guidance to prevent relapse.

Post programme there are several different types of ongoing supports allowing ex-residents to stay connected and continue their personal growth in a safe environment.

You're Invited: Open Morning on May 19th 10.30-12.30pm.

To foster greater understanding and community ties, Carlisle House is hosting an Open Morning on the 26th of May from 10:30 AM to 12:30 PM.

This event is a vital opportunity for:

- **Service Users and Families:** To see the facilities firsthand and meet the compassionate team.
 - **Healthcare Professionals:** To learn more about the referral process and the specific support pathways available.
- The team encourages anyone interested in

attending to contact them in advance to help with planning.

As part of its ongoing commitment to excellence, Carlisle House is currently recruiting Support Workers. They are looking for dedicated individuals who share their values of acceptance and respect to join their professional team. If you are passionate about social care and want to make a tangible difference in people's lives, the centre invites you to apply.

Whether you are seeking help for yourself, a loved one, or are interested in a career in social witness, the doors of Carlisle House are open.

Helpline: 028 9032 8308 (Available 9:00 AM – 11:00 PM); Email: carlislehouse@pcisocialwitness.org; Website: www.carlislehouse.org; Address: 2-4 Henry Place, Belfast, BT15 2BB

Charity No. NIC104483
Carlisle House is a service of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and is registered with the RQIA, serving adults from the Belfast and Northern Health and Social Care Trust areas.

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OPEN MORNING
26TH OF MAY 10:30AM – 12:30PM

THIS IS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SERVICE USERS, FAMILIES AND PROFESSIONALS TO LEARN MORE ABOUT CARLISLE HOUSE AND THE SUPPORT WE OFFER. TO LET US KNOW IF YOU PLAN TO ATTEND CONTACT US

WE ARE RECRUITING SUPPORT WORKERS

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OUR HELPLINE IS OPEN BETWEEN 9AM AND 11PM

EMAIL US
CARLISLEHOUSE@PCIBSW.ORG

ADDRESS
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Specsavers Connswater celebrates 25 years of eye and hearing care with local customers

THE team at Specsavers Connswater is celebrating 25 years of caring for east Belfast and beyond's eyes and ears with a weekend of fun for customers.

Across the 29th and 30th May, the store will be welcoming customers to try their latest designer frames and sunglasses, then they can snap some sharable photos at the special photo booth that will be in-store.

Dispensing director, Lynsey Caldwell, who opened the practice back in 2001, says they want to bring their customers and patients into their celebrations as it's their loyalty that has kept them here over the years; "This is a big milestone for us as a business and as a team of healthcare experts. To be able to provide consistent and accessible eye and hearing care in our community and beyond for 25 years is very special for us. We have seen generations of families come through our doors, which is a huge privilege.

"We wanted to have a celebration that includes everyone, and so on



Lynsey Caldwell and Paula Cunningham, store partners at Specsavers Connswater

Friday 29th and Saturday 30th May, we would love our regulars to come along and be some of the first to try on our new designer frames and sunglasses and be the stars of the show with our Specsavers photo booth. The photographs will be sharable for social media, and can be printed out to bring home."

Customers can also

enter in-store giveaways to win a pair of designer sunglasses,

says ophthalmic director, Paula Cunningham, who joined the practice in 2003; "It's our birthday but we want to give the gifts to our loyal customers, and celebrate the relationships we have built with them over the years. They trust us with their health, and our team of experts

takes that very seriously. However, we still plan to have a lot of fun for our celebration weekend!"

Specsavers Connswater is situated in Connswater Retail Park, beside Ulster Bank and McDonalds. Visit from 10am on 29th and 30th May to join the celebrations, or book an eye or hearing test via specsavers.co.uk/book/belfastconnswater.

Spring. My favourite time of the year.

A time for renewal, and garden planning for summer and beyond, with colourful flowers in mind, particularly those which will help sustain our declining butterflies, bees and other pollinators which need nectar and pollen to survive and reproduce.

But which plants and flowers? Native is best of course, having evolved alongside the insects, and native wildflowers are the very best, but beware of colourful seed packs which don't list what they contain. Research has shown that many so-called native wildflower seed packs contain varieties from all around the world. Much better to simply leave some of your lawn uncut to see what grows. A few years ago, I got orchids from existing seed just waiting in the ground for the opportunity to germinate and grow.

Other native plants which our pollinators love include.... ox-eye daisy, bugle, honeysuckle, bluebells, foxgloves,

cowslips, teasels and dandelions (plus some others regarded as 'weeds').

But some blow-ins, or non-natives, can be brilliant too, including lots of herbs such as lavender, marjoram, chives (and other members of the onion family), sage and rosemary.

And perennials such as catmint and scabious, and annuals including cosmos, borage (which I only 'discovered' last year, and which is so easy to grow from seed), bidens, english marigold and cornflower.

Then there are the long-living perennials, such as apple and crab apple, wild cherry, mahonia, hawthorn, pussy willow, hebe, and the one which butterflies flock to, buddleia, aka the



butterfly bush.

And don't forget the value of common ivy which provides food for bees into early winter as well as shelter and food for birds.

If you just want a rose

garden, go ahead. But if you want to enjoy long-lasting colour which feeds the bees, then please choose the plants which will help them survive and prosper.

JVA

15 years of Wool & Wisdom at The Wool Den in Ballynahinch

The knitting community in Ballynahinch is currently marking a significant milestone as The Wool Den celebrates its 15th anniversary.

Under the management of Elizabeth, the shop has established itself as a dedicated hobby and craft store specializing in knitting and crochet supplies. The Wool Den provides an extensive range of products tailored for both knitters and crocheters. The store is a known stockist for several

reputable wool brands, including: Stylecraft, King Cole and James C Brett Wools

In addition to a wide variety of yarns, the shop offers patterns and gift vouchers, positioning it as a local resource for craft-related gift ideas.

Located at 3 Chilton

Drive, Ballynahinch, the shop operates on a part-time schedule throughout the week. To celebrate its decade-and-a-half in business, the store is currently offering in-store price reductions as part of its anniversary celebration.

Opening Hours: Tuesday - Friday: 10:00 am - 5:00

pm; Saturday: 10:00 am - 2:00 pm Sunday - Monday: Closed

For those looking to get in touch regarding stock or specific patterns, Elizabeth can be reached at 078 3337 1000. The business also maintains a presence on Facebook for community updates and new arrivals.

25 Years
Belfast Connswater Retail Park

Specsavers Connswater
Celebrating 25 years of eyecare in the community

Scan the code to book an appointment or call in store

Specsavers

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Tel 028 9045 8156

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Opening Hours: Tues - Fri 10am - 5pm | Sat 10am - 2pm
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A 30-minute session is available for £30.

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OLYMPIC LIFTS; MAKING STEPS SAFER ONE STAIRLIFT AT A TIME.

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

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

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

types of staircases, including:

- Curved stairlifts: Expertly designed to navigate winding or complex staircases, effortlessly handling curved bends, intermediate landings, and corridors.

- Outdoor straight and curved stairlifts: A revolutionary solution for split-level properties, cliff-set homes, or providing access to lower gardens, garages, or cellars.

- Straight stairlifts: Reliable and space-saving options for straightforward staircases.

Beyond Stairlifts, Olympic Lifts also supplies, installs, tests, and maintains Passenger Lifts, Access Lifts, Goods Lifts, escalators, and Moving walkways. We are proud to have completed almost 20,000 projects over the past four decades. Recently, we launched our new machine room traction drive access passenger lift (the Eclipse), a versatile Hybrid Lift suitable for both domestic and commercial properties, offering numerous sizes and finish options.

Our commitment

to continuous development, investment, and product advancement ensures that Olympic Lifts offers the most up-to-date, highest quality products and services. This dedication translates to an improved purchasing experience, enhanced efficiencies, and cost savings for our valued customers.

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A new service has been launched in Affidea Hillsborough Private Clinic to help patients suffering from Glaucoma, under the care of Mr Jonathan Bonnar, Consultant Ophthalmic Surgeon with a Specialist interest in Advanced Cataract and Glaucoma Surgery.

Proven Benefits of Glaucoma laser

- up to 70% of patients did not need drops at 6 years.
- Less likelihood for glaucoma to progress than those taking drops.
- Less likelihood to require glaucoma surgery than those taking drops.
- Effects can last up to 6 years, and the procedure can safely be repeated if needed to try and keep you free from drops.

Data taken from a recent, extensive UK study.

Unlike invasive eye surgery, this laser option:

- Causes no permanent tissue damage
- Has a low risk of complications
- Doesn't require incisions— return to normal activities the next day.

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Four decades of delivering marquees, event setup and furniture hire, North Down Marquees has stood as Northern Ireland's gold standard for transforming ordinary landscapes into breathtaking venues.

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Our structures are defined by architectural elegance. We can incorporate sophisticated glass windows and clear PVC roofing into our designs, offering guests stunning views of the surroundings while ensuring everyone stays comfortable regardless of the unpredictable weather.

Stepping into our inventory is like entering an "Aladdin's Cave" of event essentials. We provide everything in-house, boasting Northern Ireland's most extensive range of furniture. From tableware, glassware

& cutlery, kitchen equipment, wedding chairs, banquet chairs, tables (round, long trestle, posers), outdoor furniture, lounge furniture, dancefloors, staging and bars, we ensure every detail of your décor and infrastructure is handled with care.

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We pride ourselves on offering scalable solutions for any occasion. Whether you are hosting an intimate garden party or a grand



event for over 1,000 guests, we tailor our layouts to fit your specific vision. Our experienced team provides full support from the very first enquiry to the final dance, managing all the logistics so you can focus entirely on the celebration.

To get started, we offer a complimentary site consultation. This visit allows us to assess your

location and provide an accurate, tailored quote for your event.

Contact Us Today You can find us at 39 Ballynahinch Rd, Carryduff, Belfast BT8 8DL. For enquiries, please give us a call at +44 (0) 28 9081 5535 or reach out via email at info@northdownmarquees.co.uk.

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Mission Farm Strong Raises Vital Funds for Farm Support Charity

Mission Farm Strong, a leading health and wellbeing campaign dedicated to supporting the farming community, has successfully raised £2,860 in aid of Rural Support — the only charity in Northern Ireland solely focused on providing practical business and wellbeing support to farmers and farming families.

The funds raised will go directly towards supporting farmers and their families who may be facing isolation, stress, financial pressure, or mental health challenges. Through Rural Support's services, individuals will benefit from the charity's confidential Support Line, one-to-one business mentoring support, wellbeing programmes, and counselling and bereavement support. These programmes and services play a crucial role in helping farm families navigate difficult periods, build resilience, and maintain both their mental and emotional wellbeing.

Mission Farm Strong is a collaborative campaign that promotes the importance of physical health, mental resilience, and spiritual wellbeing within the agricultural sector. It is supported by a wide partnership of organisations, including Rural Chaplaincy, Farm Families Health Checks, Health and Safety Executive for Northern

Ireland, Ulster Farmers' Union, Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster, Asthma + Lung UK NI and the Northern Ireland Agri-Rural Health Forum.

Over the course of the campaign, Mission Farm Strong visited six livestock marts across Northern Ireland — Kilrea, Clogher, Enniskillen, Markethill, Rathfriland, and Ballymena — engaging directly with farmers in their local communities. At each location, vital support services were offered, including free health checks delivered by the Farm Families Health Checks Van, helping farmers to proactively monitor and manage their physical wellbeing.

In addition, the Rural Chaplaincy team extended the campaign's reach into local communities by visiting nine primary schools, travelling by tractor generously provided by New Holland dealers, Burkes of Cornnascreebe. These visits helped



raise awareness of the importance of good wellbeing from a young age and strengthened connections between farming families and support networks.

The impact of this fundraising effort will be felt across the farming community, enabling more individuals to access early support, improve their wellbeing, and build resilience in an increasingly demanding

agricultural environment.

Mission Farm Strong is encouraging individuals, businesses, and rural organisations to continue supporting Rural Support through fundraising initiatives. As the only dedicated farm support charity in Northern Ireland, Rural Support relies on public donations to sustain its vital work. By getting involved, you can help ensure that farmers and their families

receive the support they need to thrive — both on and off the farm. Contact their Fundraising Team today on 028 8676 0040 to see how you can get involved such as hosting a fundraiser, signing up to their Rural Support initiative or by becoming a Corporate Member. For more information, please visit the charity's website www.ruralsupport.org.uk or email info@ruralsupport.org.uk

Minister celebrates community fund programme

Communities Minister Gordon Lyons has praised the work of those involved in the community sector across Northern Ireland as he met some of those who have benefited through his Department's continued investment in its Neighbourhood Renewal programme.

The Department for Communities (DfC) invests over £20million per annum in Neighbourhood Renewal, supporting the work of voluntary and community organisations in the most deprived areas across Northern Ireland, with the Small Capital Investment Programme being a key component of this funding.

In 2024/25, the Fund helped over 1,500 people secure employment through targeted training and employability interventions, as well as giving more than 5,500 adults the opportunity to volunteer within their communities.

Speaking at a community event at the Ecos Centre in Ballymena, Minister Lyons said: "These projects may be described as 'small capital,' but their impact is anything but small. Investment in small capital costs keeps services running and allows groups to adapt, expand, or innovate. Whether it's roof repairs,

upgraded IT equipment, a kitchen refurbishment, or essential accessibility improvements - these are not minor details - they are the practical enablers of meaningful community impact. My Department's ongoing investment in Neighbourhood Renewal reflects a long term commitment, one that is not only financial but deeply rooted in our belief in the power of communities to shape their own futures."

Over the last year alone, DfC has supported 77 community projects through his fund, with an investment of £1.18m. A number of community representatives attending today's event took the opportunity to share their stories on the positive impact this funding has had.

Angela Mulholland, West Bann Development said: "This funding has ensured that as a service provider to the local community, we were able to continue to offer a first-class service and providing people with a

safe secure environment to learn, play and create."

Jim McIlroy, Harryville Men's Shed added: "Men's Shed provides a vital role within the community offering a safe, welcoming space where men can connect, learn, and support one another. This investment has played a vital role in helping to maintain and strengthen the services we provide to men across the Ballymena community."

Theresa Brady, Ionad na Fuiseoige said: "Small capital funding meets a real need in the community - relatively small amounts of money required that can make a huge difference to the local area."

John Hunter, Community Sports Network, Shankill added: "Relatively small investments can deliver significant, long-term impact. This funding has created lasting benefits, improving safety, expanding opportunities, and allowing us to meet a broader range of community needs."



25 Years of Connection 2001-2026

For 25 years, East Belfast Sure Start has been at the heart of the community—connecting children, parents and families with the support they need to thrive from the very beginning.

We are proud to have supported generations of families by:

- Strengthening early development
- Promoting family health and wellbeing
- Working alongside families to support children at home
- Building trusted local connections

As we celebrate our 25th Anniversary, we would like to thank the families, staff and partners who have been part of our journey—and we look forward to continuing these connections for many years to come. If you have a child aged between 0 and 4 years old and are interested in our services please connect with us.

East Belfast Sure Start Information & Services

55 Templemore Avenue, Belfast, BT5 4FP T: 028 9073 5686

E: admin@surestarteast.org.uk | W: www.eastbelfastsurestart.co.uk



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PARENTS' TOP ONLINE SEARCHES ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN REVEALED

96% of parents in Northern Ireland say they turn to the internet to decode how their child sees the world, with the most obscure and quirky searches revealed.

These queries include 'why do kids say 6 7?', 'why do kids eat sponges?', 'why do kids like sitting in a box?' and 'do kids naturally hate vegetables?'.
A massive 96% of parents struggle to understand their child's weird and wonderful world, according to the research. However, the eye care experts at Specsavers, who commissioned the study, warn that a crucial topic is being missed - with no parents in Northern Ireland (0%) seeking advice on their child's vision.

When it comes to their child's physical health, 33% have searched for answers online, with most common themes including sleep problems or tiredness (75%), mental wellbeing or emotional health (63%), high temperatures (50%), or developmental milestones (50%). Yet 0% have sought advice about ways to

improve kids' eyesight.

Of those who haven't, many say it's because they didn't spot vision problems in their child (28%) or believe their child is too young for it to be a concern (12%). Paula Cunningham, ophthalmic director from Specsavers Connswater, highlights that children often don't report vision issues because they assume what they see is normal - and regular eye tests are recommended from the age of three.

Child psychologist, Dr Elizabeth Kilbey, adds: "It's not surprising parents are turning to search engines to help navigate the many questions that come with raising children - from behaviour and development to the often weird and wonderful things kids say or do. "Children are curious and imaginative, and this plays a vital role



in how they learn, explore and build confidence. Because so much of that discovery is visual, clear vision is crucial to their development. In all areas of life, and the classroom

especially, clear vision is fundamental. Being able to see and focus underpins learning; when vision is affected, it can influence a child's attention, engagement and behaviour.

That's why parents should prioritise eye health as an important part of their child's overall wellbeing."

The survey uncovers what parents in Northern Ireland search for most,

with 38% saying they search about their child's habits or routines, while a similar amount (33%) question whether certain behaviours of their child are common. Interestingly,

more than half of parents (58%) admit their online searches regularly start with "Is it normal for my child to...".

When it comes to their child's eye health, 16% of parents are not aware of any common eyesight issues which can affect children, such as short-sightedness or lazy eyes (amblyopia). Worryingly, 12% of those polled, have never taken their child for an eye test, while 20% haven't done so within the last two years. The main reason for this was simply because their child hasn't complained about their vision (12%), with 12% also saying they would make an appointment if there appeared to be an issue.

Paula Cunningham, ophthalmic director from Specsavers Connswater, says "This research proves

how easy it is to overlook a child's eye health unless obvious symptoms appear. But that's why being proactive is so important. Regular eye tests can identify issues early - often before a child realises anything is wrong. What many parents may not realise is that many sight conditions, such as myopia in kids, can be managed or corrected if they're detected before the age of eight, while vision is still developing."

The research aims to encourage parents to prioritise their children's eye health and reveals how children's sight problems are going unnoticed. In fact, around 1 in 5 children under 10 experience sight conditions according to the Royal College of Ophthalmologists* - which is up to 1.6 million children in the UK**.

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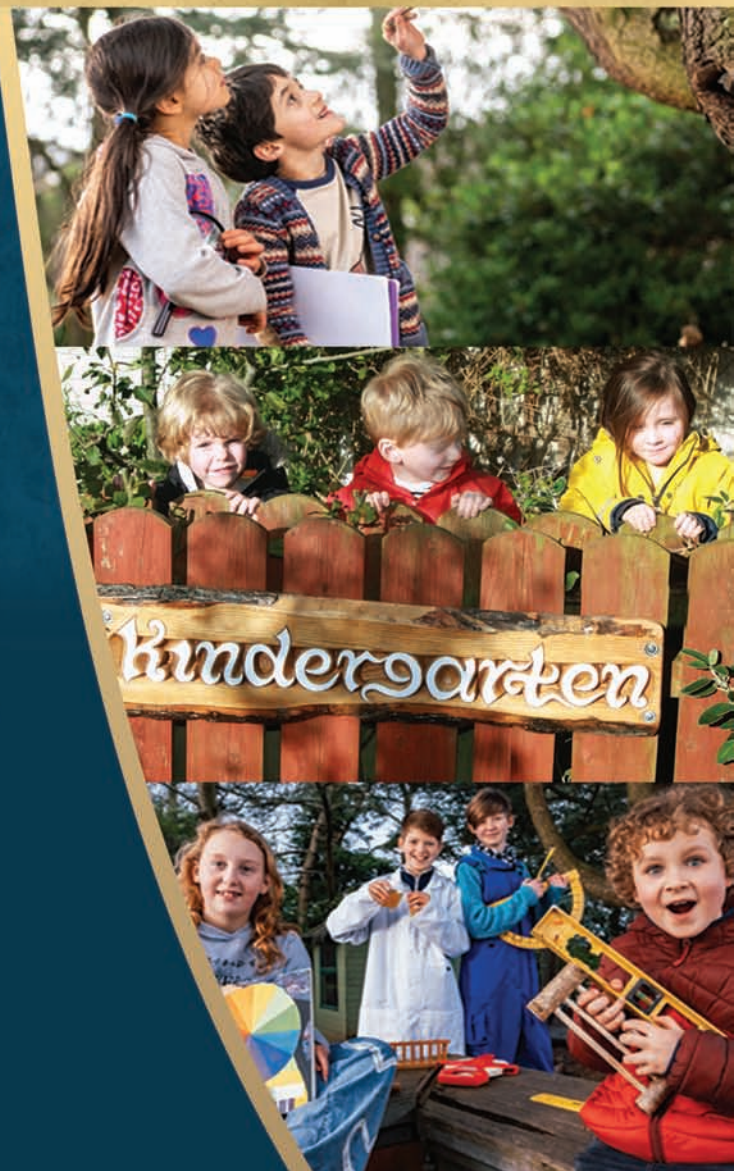


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Cash Converters, Belfast: Providing a bargain shopping destination and selling service for 30 years!

Cash Converters Belfast has been a fixture of the city's High Street since it was established by founding Director Martin McGrath in September 1996, offering a unique blend of retail and financial services.

Located at 22 High Street, the branch is a reliable destination for all who are looking to either de-clutter their homes or hunt down a high-quality bargain. It operates six days a week, providing a consistent and professional presence for city-centre shoppers and those in need of immediate financial solutions.

The store's two retail floors are a diverse marketplace where the inventory changes daily. Shoppers can find everything from high-end jewellery and luxury watches to the latest gaming consoles and musical instruments. For those looking to sell, the store offers instant valuations and immediate cash payments for gold and all quality pre-owned goods.

Cash Converters, Belfast Manager Lee Cochrane says:



"Gold and silver jewellery are always in high demand. We currently have a fabulous selection of all types of jewellery in-store."

Beyond traditional retail, the branch specializes in flexible cash options like a Buyback service. This allows customers to sell an item for quick funds

while retaining the option to repurchase it within twenty-eight days for the original price plus a small administration fee.

To make use of these buying and borrowing services, customers must provide a valid photo ID and proof of address dated within the last three months. The ten-strong Belfast team are noted

for their efficiency and straightforward approach, making the store a dependable choice for those who value speed and security. Whether you are searching for a rare find or managing a temporary budget gap, this branch remains one of the most versatile service providers in the heart of the city!

Discover Glasgow the Easy Way with HANNON Coach & Sail

Planning a city break in Glasgow? Skip the airport queues and travel stress and choose the Belfast-Glasgow Express with HANNON Coach & Sail—a comfortable, hassle-free way to reach the heart of Scotland's largest city.

Now departing from the new Belfast Grand Central Station, this award-winning service offers a smooth coach-and-ferry journey straight into Glasgow city centre, making it the perfect alternative to flying. Already a firm favourite with seasoned travellers, the Belfast-Glasgow Express is proudly rated 5-Star on TripAdvisor.

Glasgow is a vibrant, stylish city with something for everyone. From world-class culture and nightlife to outstanding restaurants and bars, it's a destination that never disappoints. Shoppers are particularly well catered for—Glasgow is widely

recognised as the UK's top shopping destination outside London, with its famous 'Style Mile' offering unbeatable retail therapy.

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The service operates twice daily from Belfast Grand Central Station (Stand 18) and drops passengers at Glasgow Buchanan Bus Station,



close to the Style Mile and a wide range of excellent city-centre hotels.

Company Director Aodh Hannon says the service's popularity comes down to convenience and simplicity.

"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."

Bookings can be made online at www.hannoncoach.com, or by phone through HANNON's friendly booking team on 028 9265 0700 (Monday-Friday).

Balmoral Show 2026

The 157th Balmoral Show is set to return to the Eikon Exhibition Centre from Wednesday, 13th May to Saturday, 16th May 2026, marking another milestone for Northern Ireland's premier agri-food event.

As the largest celebration of its kind in the country, the showgrounds at Balmoral Park will once again transform into a bustling hub of activity, drawing over 100,000 visitors who come to soak up the famous "Balmoral Buzz." Whether you are a lifelong farming enthusiast or a first-time visitor looking for a quintessential family day out, the 2026 program promises a balanced blend of traditional agricultural competition and high-octane modern entertainment.

In the Main Arena, the headline attraction for 2026 is the Bolddog FMX team, whose gravity-defying freestyle motocross stunts are sure to provide a heart-pounding spectacle. For those who prefer the elegance of equine sports over revving engines, the International Show Jumping competitions remain a crown jewel of the show, featuring top-tier riders competing for prestigious

titles. The arena schedule is packed from morning until evening, ensuring there is a constant rotation of action, from the thundering hooves of the heavy horse displays to the precision of the sheepdog trials.

Food lovers will find their sanctuary in the NI Food Pavilion, which remains the beating heart of the show's gastronomic offering. This year, the pavilion will feature an array of artisan producers showcasing everything from award-winning cheeses and local spirits to handcrafted desserts. Visitors can enjoy live cooking demonstrations and learn about the important "field to fork" journey, highlighting the sustainability and quality of Northern Ireland's local produce. It is a fantastic opportunity to sample new flavours and chat directly with the makers behind the province's most successful food brands.

At its agricultural core,

the show will host over 3,500 animals across hundreds of competitive classes. From the majestic Clydesdale horses and sleek beef cattle to various breeds of sheep, goats, and pigs, the livestock displays offer a masterclass in breeding and animal husbandry. The Cattle Parade remains a highlight of the weekend, offering a mesmerising sight as the champion winners from various categories circle the arena in a display of rural pride and excellence. For the curious, the poultry and rabbit sections often provide a quieter but equally charming look at smaller prize-winning specimens.

Beyond the animals and food, the showgrounds offer extensive shopping and leisure opportunities with over 500 trade stands. You can find everything from the latest massive farm machinery and tractor tech to boutique country fashion

and garden furniture. A revamped Horticulture Area will provide inspiration for gardening enthusiasts, while the Downtown Stage offers a festive backdrop of live music and local talent. For the younger visitors, the Funfair is a mandatory stop, providing classic thrills and games that round out the perfect day of exploration.

As you prepare for your visit, it is worth noting that the show maintains a strict no-dogs policy, with the exception of assistance animals, to ensure the safety and comfort of both visitors and the valuable livestock on display. The gates open at 9:30 am each morning, staying open until 7:00 pm from Wednesday to Friday, and closing slightly earlier at 6:00 pm on Saturday. With 65 acres of site to cover, comfortable footwear is your best friend—because "fashionable" wellies are only practical if they can handle several miles of walking.

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THE RISE OF LIVED-IN LUXURY

As 2026 gains momentum towards the summer months we are collectively moving away from the “catalog-perfect” minimalism that dominated the early 2020s and leaning into something much more soulful.

For Spring/Summer 2026, the vibe is authentic, immersive, and unapologetically tactile. If your home feels like a curated collection of your life’s best moments rather than a sterile showroom, you are exactly on trend.

The Palette: Deep Teals and Sun-Kissed Earth

Forget the washed-out pastels of yesteryear.

This season, designers are embracing colours with serious gravitas. Transformative Teal has emerged as a powerhouse shade, sitting right between blue and green to offer a look that is both dramatic and grounding. It works particularly well when used in velvet upholstery or as a bold “colour drench” on walls. To balance this depth,

we are seeing a surge in Amber and Burnt Caramel. These warm, unctuous tones replace the flat beiges of the past, bringing a sense of a sun-bleached Mediterranean retreat to any room. Perhaps most surprising is the breakout duo of Icy Blue and Burgundy; the crispness of the blue lifts the weight of the deep red, creating a look that feels both retro and avant-garde.

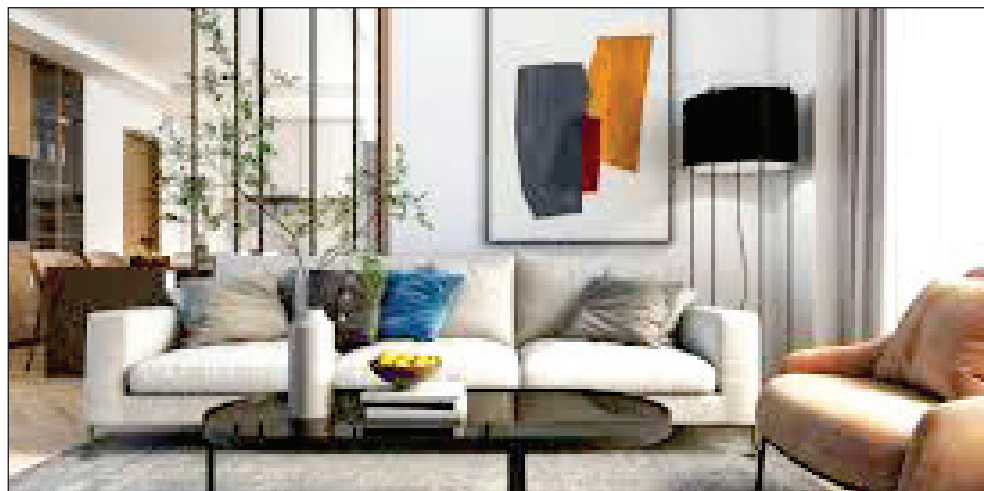
“Texture-Maxxing” and Materiality

The primary goal this season is to make every surface worth touching, a movement we’ve dubbed “Texture-Maxxing.” Light Scandi oak is taking a backseat to richer woods like walnut and chocolate mahogany, which provide a traditional anchor to otherwise modern rooms. We are also firmly in a new Stone Age. Travertine and Calacatta marble are no longer reserved for countertops; instead, they are appearing as stone-base lamps, fluted side tables, and heavy marble trays that add

physical and visual weight to your decor. To soften these hard surfaces, natural fibers remain essential. While linen is still the king of summer, it is now being joined by heavy bouclé, wool, and even wrought iron for a mix of textures that feel high-end yet entirely approachable.

The Shape of Things: Curves and Postmodernism

Sharp angles are officially out, replaced by fluid, undulating lines that feel more organic. The “skirted sofa” has returned with a vengeance, proving that what was once considered “grandma style” can be reimagined as romantic and sophisticated with the right piping and fabric. This flows into a massive revival of European Postmodernism from the 1970s through the 1990s. We are seeing a preference for low-profile modular sofas and space-age fiberglass coffee tables that prioritize comfort and flow. The trend of “sofa-scaping” has also taken hold, where homeowners choose one



massive, curved statement piece and design the entire room’s energy around its silhouette.

Folk Bohemia and Fruit Motifs

Decor accents are becoming more whimsical and artisan-focused this year. We are seeing a move toward Folk Bohemia, which is far removed from the “boho” trends

of a decade ago. This version is more colourful and craft-heavy, featuring Kelim rugs, intricate lattice patchwork cushions, and hand-painted ceramics. Adding a theatrical flourish to these spaces is the rise of fruit motifs. From pear-shaped paperweights to pomegranate-shaped glass ornaments and oversized apple sculptures, these

playful nods to the bounty of summer add a sense of humor and vitality to bookshelves and coffee tables.

The New Direction of Home

The overarching theme for 2026 is intention. Whether you are adding a splash of chartreuse to a bathroom or layering rugs for extra depth, the focus is squarely

on how a space makes you feel rather than how it looks in a photograph. We have reached a point where we are done decorating for “the grid” and have finally started decorating for the human beings living inside. The transition from cool, clinical whites to rich, lived-in layers marks a return to the home as a true sanctuary of personal expression.

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afford. Your first home is a stepping stone. It is not your forever home. Cash is king in this game. Save

every penny you can find. Ditch the daily takeaway coffee and the fancy gym membership. Every pound counts when you are building a deposit. Look into a Lifetime ISA for a free government boost. It is

essentially free money and you would be a fool to ignore it. Keep your savings in a high-interest account. Watch that pot grow day by day.

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mortgage. One missed payment can ruin everything. Check your report today and fix any errors. Do not take out new loans or credit cards before you apply. Lenders want to see a boring and predictable borrower. Pay your bills on time every single month. Register on the electoral roll to prove who you are.

Get an Agreement in Principle before you even start looking. It shows sellers you are serious and ready to move. This piece of paper is your golden ticket. Without it you are just another window shopper. Find a mortgage broker who knows the market inside out. They can find deals that you will never see on the high street. Be prepared to move fast when the right place appears.

Do not be fooled by

a fresh coat of paint and a scented candle. Look for the cracks behind the furniture. Check the age of the boiler and the state of the roof. Visit the street at night to see what the neighbours are really like. Ask the agent tough questions and do not take “I don’t know” for an answer. Trust your gut but verify everything with a professional survey.

Patience is a virtue during the legal process. Conveyancing can take months and it will test your nerves. Keep in constant contact with your solicitor and do not be afraid to nudge them. Once you exchange contracts the house is legally yours. Insurance must be in place the moment you swap. Then comes completion day. Grab the keys and start your new life.



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Howden's Ravenhill Road, Belfast celebrates 2nd Anniversary with Michelle at Helm

Celebrating two years of serving the trade and the local community, Howdens on Ravenhill Road has become a cornerstone for builders and homeowners alike in South Belfast.

Since its doors first opened in 2022, the branch has established itself as a go-to destination for high-quality kitchens and bedrooms, joinery, and hardware.

Since the very first day of trading, the branch has been led by Michelle Law, whose consistent leadership as Manager has been instrumental in the depot's growth.

Under Michelle's guidance, the Ravenhill team has built a reputation for the "no-nonsense" trade service that Howdens is famous for—focusing on stock availability, expert design advice, and fostering strong relationships with local tradespeople. Whether it's a small renovation or a large-scale housing project,

the branch has played a vital role in transforming homes across Belfast.

The success of the Ravenhill Road branch reflects a broader period of rapid expansion for Howdens across Northern Ireland. In the two years since this depot opened, the company has significantly increased its footprint in the region to meet rising demand.

Howdens now operates over 25 depots across Northern Ireland, including recent additions in locations like Ballynahinch and expanded facilities in Greater Belfast. This growth is part of a strategic "city-based" approach, ensuring that trade professionals are never more than a short drive

away from a local branch. By investing in Northern Ireland, Howdens has not only supported the local construction industry but has also created dozens of skilled jobs in sales, design, and logistics.

Founded in 1995 with just 14 depots, Howdens has grown into the UK's number one specialist kitchen supplier and a member of the FTSE 100. Despite its scale—now operating nearly 900 depots across the UK, Ireland, France, and Belgium—the company remains committed to its founding principle: being "worthwhile for all concerned."

Howdens Ravenhill Road is at 55 Ravenhill Road, Belfast BT6 8DU. Tel: 028 9010 1600

KEEPING YOUR COOL

The "Cool House" isn't just an aesthetic choice; it is a strategic approach to living that blends historical design with modern sustainability.

By focusing on how heat enters and moves through a building we can create a sanctuary that feels refreshing without relying solely on the hum of a cooling unit and the resulting spike in the electricity bill.

One of the most effective ways to lower indoor temperatures is to stop the sun before it ever touches the glass. Traditional awnings and external shutters are making a significant comeback in contemporary design because they address the root of the problem. While interior blinds provide privacy they often allow solar heat to pass through the window and become trapped behind the fabric. By installing external louvres or deep eaves we can block the harshest rays during the peak of the day and ensure that the interior remains naturally shaded. This approach prioritises the "envelope" of the home and transforms the facade into a functional

layer of climate control.

Nature offers its own ingenious cooling system through the process of transpiration. Incorporating an "indoor jungle" is more than just a decorative trend; it is a way to actively humidify and cool the air within a room. Large-leaved plant varieties such as Peace Lilies and Rubber Trees act as natural evaporative coolers. They release moisture into the atmosphere and helping to break up stagnant heat. When strategically placed near windows or in breezy corridors these plants create a microclimate that feels significantly fresher and more revitalising than a sterile air-conditioned environment.

Managing the airflow of a house is an art form that requires understanding the daily rhythm of the sun. The most effective low-tech hack is often the most counter-intuitive: closing the windows and drawing the

curtains during the hottest hours of the afternoon. By sealing the house when the outdoor air is warmer than the indoor air we preserve the thermal mass of the

building. Once the sun sets and the outside temperature drops opening windows on opposite sides of the house creates a cross-breeze that flushes out the day's

warmth and replaces it with the crisp air of the evening. This rhythmic approach to ventilation ensures that the home remains a true refuge from the summer heat.

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CHOOSING FLOORING FOR THE LIVING ROOM

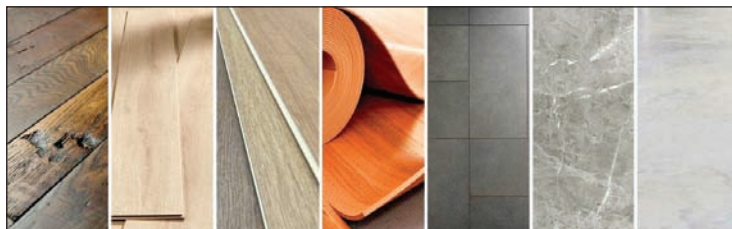
Selecting the right flooring for a living room is perhaps the most significant design decision a homeowner will face as it serves as the literal foundation for every other stylistic choice.

Because this space is often the busiest hub of the house the material underfoot must be robust enough to handle heavy foot traffic and the occasional wine spill while still feeling inviting enough for a lazy Sunday afternoon. The challenge lies in finding a balance between durability and the specific sensory experience you want to evoke during the warmer months when we tend to move between the garden and the sofa with greater frequency.

Hardwood remains the gold standard for many and it offers a timeless warmth that ages beautifully over decades. In a summer-inspired home lighter timbers such as oak or ash can lift the entire mood of a room by reflecting natural light and creating an airy Scandinavian feel. While solid wood is a significant

investment it provides a natural insulation that feels comfortable underfoot regardless of the season. For those who worry about the practicalities of kids or pets engineered wood offers a similar aesthetic with added stability and it is less likely to warp when the humidity levels fluctuate during a heatwave.

If your goal is to create a sense of "Mediterranean cool" then natural stone or porcelain tiles are an excellent choice for the main living area. These materials have a high thermal mass which means they stay refreshingly chilled even when the sun is beating down on the windows. While stone can sometimes feel austere in a traditional setting choosing a honed finish rather than a high-gloss polish can soften the look



and make the room feel more organic. Pairing these hard surfaces with large natural fibre rugs such as jute or sisal allows you to define the seating area and it adds a layer of texture that feels undeniably summery.

For those who prefer the softness of carpet the trend has shifted away from heavy shags toward flatter weaves and natural blends. A wool-sisal mix provides the best of both worlds by offering the durability of plant fibres and the softness of traditional carpeting.

Choosing a neutral palette like oatmeal or pale sand

can make a small living room feel significantly larger and it provides a versatile backdrop that allows you to swap out seasonal accessories like bright linen cushions or nautical throws. It is important to remember that the pile height will affect how much heat the room retains so a shorter loop is generally preferable for maintaining a breezy atmosphere.

Modern innovations like Luxury Vinyl Tile or LVT have also become a formidable contender for the living room floor and they are particularly useful for open-plan

homes where the lounge flows directly into the kitchen or garden. These materials can convincingly mimic the look of reclaimed timber or vintage encaustic tiles while being entirely waterproof and incredibly easy to clean. This makes them a brilliant option for families who want a high-end look without the stress of constant maintenance. Ultimately the best flooring is one that invites you to kick off your shoes the moment you walk through the door and it should feel like a seamless part of your home's personality.

What colour goes with taupe?

Taupe is a beautiful colour; with its natural hue and many shades, taupe can blend in with almost any colour scheme.

Taupe is a classic, personality-infused, versatile colour and a great partner to many neutral and novel colours. With taupe, you can choose from a broad spectrum of shades, from light to dark. Choose light shades of taupe for a sleek and straightforward base and use darker shades to show a little creativity in your colour scheme.

Homeowners commonly ask, 'Is taupe brown or grey?' Or, you might hear taupe referred to as 'greige' (a mix of grey and beige), but neither is right. Taupe is a blend of brown and grey tones with warmer undertones. Available in many shades, taupe can appear warmer or cooler based on the hue and saturation. Before choosing taupe, always consider the natural light your chosen room receives in a day. Taupe can change its tone and mood depending on how much natural light it gets.

Opt for all taupe. A popular way to style taupe is to simply use taupe in various



shades in a monochromatic colour scheme. You can use taupe in its darkest to lightest shades on multiple surfaces for a cohesive, interesting, timeless design. Different sheens, like matte on walls and satin on wood surfaces like skirting and furniture, create a subtle contrast. Choose deeper taupe pillows, throws and rugs to add depth and interest. Using a monochromatic colour scheme also shines the spotlight on any interesting architectural details like moulding or old windows.

Taupe and trusty green. Spruce up any neutral shade with lush, warm undertones of vivid greens like forest green or dark emerald.

If more natural shades of green are your thing: Sage, Olive green or moss green

are perfect choices. However, for a cooler design scheme, use taupe as a base with sage or olive green accents in combination with gold metallic details for a sense of luxury.

Darker shades of green look stunning as an accent wall. Add some green accent pieces like pillows and throws, and throw in some industrial style lighting and furnishings for a real contemporary finish.

Choosing taupe in your colour scheme creates a calm and snug atmosphere. As a colour, it can be perfect for entertaining, relaxing, family time, and sleeping, like bedrooms and living rooms. However, taupe's serene nature is also perfect for spa-like bathrooms and modern kitchens.

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SOME SUMMER IDEAS FOR FAMILY DAYS OUT

Summer 2026 in Northern Ireland is shaping up to be a legendary season, especially with the arrival of some massive cultural milestones.

Whether you are a local looking to rediscover your own backyard or you are planning to host visiting family, the calendar is packed with a mix of high-energy festivals and quiet, scenic escapes. From the bustling streets of Belfast to the windswept North Coast, there is a refreshing variety of ways to keep the kids entertained—and perhaps even enjoy yourself in the process.

The Rhythm of the City: Belfast's Big Summer

One headline event for this year is the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, which descends upon Belfast from August 2nd to 9th. This is the first time the city has hosted the "World Cup" of Irish traditional music, and it is expected to transform the city centre into a massive, family-friendly carnival. You can expect the streets to be alive with sessions, pageants, and plenty of free outdoor performances. Just before the Fleadh kicks off, Belfast TradFest runs from late July into the first week of August, offering a perfect warm-up with world-class concerts and workshops that are surprisingly accessible for younger listeners. If you need a break from the music, the Ulster Museum remains a reliable refuge, offering everything from

Takabuti the mummy to dinosaur exhibits, and it is conveniently located right next to the park for a post-museum picnic.

Coastal Adventures and Maritime Magic

Heading north, the Foyle Maritime Festival in Derry~Londonderry returns in late June to celebrate the city's seafaring history along the River Foyle. It is a fantastic spot for children who love ships, street performers, and the inevitable excitement of a fireworks finale. Further along the Causeway Coast, the Red Sails Festival in Portstewart takes over the promenade in mid-July. It is a quintessential local festival featuring Irish dancing, live music on the waterfront, and sandcastle competitions that bring out the competitive streak in even the most relaxed parents. For those who prefer a bit of speed, the North West 200 in May often kicks off the summer vibes early, but for a family day out later in the season, the Ulster International Rally in Ballymena this August celebrates its 50th anniversary with plenty of high-octane spectacle.

Festivals in the Fields: Arts and Nature

For a more laid-back, "boots and grass" experience, the Stendhal Festival in Limavady



remains the gold standard for family-focused music events. Taking place in early July at Ballymully Cottage Farm, it offers a dedicated family programme that manages to be cool enough for teenagers while keeping toddlers safely occupied with arts and crafts. If you are looking for something closer to home in County Down, Down Time Summerfest in Downpatrick provides a quirky mix of horse racing, BMX displays, and live music in the heart of St. Patrick's country. It is the kind of event where you can watch a high-energy stunt show and then wander over to a quiet heritage workshop within the same hour.

Thrills, Spills, and Indoor Backups

We all know the Northern Irish summer

can occasionally involve four seasons in a single afternoon. When the clouds turn grey, W5 at the SSE Arena is still the champion of indoor entertainment, with over 250 interactive exhibits that make science feel like a playground. For the older, more adventurous kids, The Jungle NI in Moneymore offers llama trekking and tree-top adventures that are perfect for burning off excess energy. Alternatively, the Exploris Aquarium in Portaferry allows for an immersive look at the local marine life of Strangford Lough, providing a great educational hook that doesn't feel like a school lesson. Whatever the weather, the key this year is to keep a rain jacket in the boot of the car just in case.

Your Ultimate Carlingford Escape

The Carlingford Lough Greenway stretches from King John's Castle and Carlingford Marina towards Newry, offering a safe and scenic route perfect for walkers, cyclists, and families looking to explore at their own pace.

Bike hire is readily available in the village, making it easy to set off on a relaxed coastal cycle or a fun family adventure.

Located just minutes away, the newly renovated Four Seasons Hotel Carlingford is the ideal base for a break that blends outdoor adventure with comfort and relaxation.

Beyond the Greenway, Carlingford is packed with activities with something for everyone. Spend a sunny afternoon at the beach, where little ones can paddle safely while thrill-seekers enjoy pier jumping and refreshing sea swims. For something truly memorable, experience the popular Hot Box Sauna beside the lough and take the staircase straight into the sea for an invigorating dip.

If you prefer to stay on land, there are beautiful hiking trails



and scenic picnic spots all around the Cooley Peninsula, ideal for laid-back afternoons with breathtaking views. The nearby Carlingford Adventure Centre offers even more excitement with kayaking, paddleboarding and land-based adventures to keep all ages entertained throughout the summer months. Back in the medieval

village, explore winding streets steeped in history, browse independent boutiques, enjoy a visit to King John's Castle, or treat yourself to one of the many welcoming cafés and restaurants. As evening falls, soak up live music in a cosy pub or enjoy a relaxed dinner together.

After a full day of adventure, retreat to the Four Seasons

Hotel Carlingford, where guests can enjoy complimentary access to the hotel's leisure facilities, including the swimming pool and sauna — the perfect way to unwind and recharge. With warm hospitality and cloud-soft beds awaiting you, it's a destination that offers the perfect balance of fun, summer adventure, and peaceful relaxation.





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MYEARTH USERS RECYCLE OVER 100,000 PIECES OF LITTER

myEARTH - Northern Ireland's digital hub for environmental action - is calling on more across Bangor to join its platform, as new figures reveal that users across NI have already recorded more than 100,000 pieces of litter recycled, and 159,783 hours outdoors spent outdoors, since the platform launched less than a year ago.

Developed by Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful in partnership with Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL), myEARTH provides environmental charities, education providers and community groups a dedicated space to connect with schools and households. Organisations simply upload activities known as 'Action Cards' such as litter picking, nature walks, bird watching, planting and recycling, allowing users to choose and complete them in exchange for points.

Maghera's Yvonne Fleming created The Weatherbies in 2016. The weather-themed characters - Sammy Sun, Rosie Rain and Ronny Rain - help teachers and introduce children to various environmental themes through songs and stories.

As Eco-Schools NI's



Alex Hall, Project Manager at myEARTH and Peter Fleming, Business Development Manager at The Weatherbies (2)

official Early Years partner, The Weatherbies are also using the myEARTH platform to run a schools Song Competition, with 300 schools across NI tracking their Eco-Schools projects through myEARTH. Pupils are invited to create a song about making their school greener and the winning entry will be turned into an

animated music video featuring the children's artwork. Using the Weatherbies resources in any Early Years setting can also count towards the Climate Ready Classroom Award, also found on myEARTH.

Alongside The Weatherbies, over 40 other local partners including the National Trust, Ulster Wildlife and RSPB NI have joined

the myEARTH platform, taking advantage of the ready-made route to connect with audiences and amplify their impact.

myEARTH is funded through a £488,557 grant from Dormant Assets NI, delivered by The National Lottery Community Fund.

To register an activity or sign-up to log participation visit www.myearth.org.uk

Feeding wild birds safely this summer

The results from this year's Big Garden Birdwatch have revealed that once again the House Sparrow held onto the top spot and Starling remains at number two, with Blue Tit creeping up one place to number three. Chaffinch and Goldfinch make up the other top five most recorded species in Northern Ireland gardens and parks.

These findings come from the 47th Big Garden Birdwatch, the UK's largest garden-based wildlife survey, which took place in January. Blackbird, Great Tit and Robin followed in sixth to eighth place, followed by Magpie in ninth and Coal Tit rounding out the top 10.

This year, more than 650,000 people across the UK counted over nine million birds, spanning 80 different species. In Northern Ireland, nearly 13,000 people participated, showcasing a fantastic turnout from nature enthusiasts of all ages, providing a valuable annual snapshot of how our most common garden birds are faring.

However, it is further down the garden rankings where the real story lies. At 19th place on the list is Greenfinch, which has seen significant declines over the years. Other UK-wide surveys show that Greenfinches have dropped by over 65% since the latest UK wide surveys began in the mid 1990s, equating to the loss of over two million birds.

The cause of these losses is disease, especially a disease called trichomonosis, which spreads more easily when birds gather around

feeders—particularly in summer and autumn. As a result of these declines, Greenfinches are now on the UK Red List

With the help of other experts, RSPB scientists have taken a fresh look at what happens when we feed garden birds. It turns out the picture is quite mixed: there are clear benefits, but also some risks, and plenty we still don't fully understand.

Anne-Marie McDewitt, RSPB NI's Head of Species said: "Feeding birds is something millions of us love and value, but the science shows us that birds such as Greenfinches have been affected by the spread of disease at feeders."

Despite the risks, feeding garden birds remains hugely beneficial when done safely and at appropriate times of year. The RSPB is asking the public to adopt simple seasonal changes that will help protect bird health in the long term.

The message is simple: Feed safely. Feed seasonally.

Feed seasonally - It's important to adjust what we feed our garden birds during the summer and autumn months when there's a higher risk of disease spreading.

- From 1 May to 31 October: Pause filling your bird feeders with seed and

peanuts to prevent too many birds gathering in one place. It's okay to keep offering small amounts of mealworms, fat balls, or suet year-round.

Feed safely - Just one infected bird can turn your busy feeder into a disease hotspot. To help keep birds healthy, we need to prioritise hygiene.

- Clean and move your feeders weekly: Get into the habit of giving your feeders a good clean at least once a week. If possible, place your feeders in a different spot after each clean to prevent the build-up of contaminated debris underneath. Any existing debris should be cleared up.

- Change water daily: Only offer water if you're able to change it every day and make sure it's tap water. Water baths should also be cleaned weekly.

- Retire flat-surfaced feeders: Research has confirmed that there's a higher risk of the disease spreading on flat surfaces, where contaminated food can collect for other birds to eat. This means bidding a fond farewell to feeders that have any flat surfaces - including bird tables.

As well as adjusting the way we all feed our garden birds, there are

plenty of other things we can do to support them to find their own food. You could consider bird-friendly planting - such as sunflowers, teasels and ivy - which helps to provide natural, safer food sources and encourages insects.

Anne-Marie McDewitt continues "We're not asking people to stop feeding, just to feed in a way that protects birds' long-term health. By making small changes together, we can ensure garden feeding continues to be a positive force for nature."

The Big Garden Birdwatch is a large-scale citizen science survey that started in 1979. Participants are asked to count the maximum number of each species recorded at their chosen location (mainly gardens but also parks or other green spaces) during a one-hour period over the last weekend in January. Teachers and pupils also took part in Big Schools' Birdwatch, during the first half of spring term, with a record breaking 143,000 participants this year.

Thanks to our members and supporters, the RSPB can carry out vital conservation efforts to support nature throughout the year. To find out more visit www.rspb.org.uk

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SAVE MONEY WHILE MOTORING

Unless you've decided to power your car with Flintstone-style footwork, getting from A to B has likely become a significant line item in your monthly budget.

In 2026, with fuel prices and maintenance costs always on the move, driving frugally is less about being "cheap" and more about efficiency engineering. It's about understanding the physics of your vehicle and making small, tactical adjustments that keep more money in your pocket.

Your right foot is the most important component of your car's fuel system. If you treat your pedals like binary switches—either 100% on or 100% off—you are essentially throwing cash out of the exhaust pipe. Real efficiency begins by pretending there is a literal egg under the gas pedal; you want to accelerate smoothly and gradually to avoid "gulping" fuel. Similarly, the "coast is clear" method is your best friend. If you see a red light a quarter-mile ahead, take your foot off the gas immediately. Let friction and gravity do the work for you, rather than maintaining speed only to slam on the brakes at the last second.

Most vehicles hit their peak fuel-efficiency "sweet spot" between 45 and



60 mph. Once you cross that 65 mph threshold, aerodynamic drag increases exponentially. At higher speeds, your car essentially transforms into an aerodynamic brick, fighting against the air and burning significantly more fuel just to maintain its pace. Slowing down by just 5 or 10 mph on the highway can often save you 10% to 15% on fuel over a long trip.

A car that has to work harder uses more energy, so keeping your vehicle in peak physical condition is non-negotiable. Start

by checking your tire pressure at least once a month. Under-inflated tires create higher rolling resistance, which forces the engine to work harder just to keep the wheels turning. Keeping them at the manufacturer's recommended PSI (usually found on a sticker inside the driver's door) can improve your mileage by up to 3%.

Plan your route to minimize stop-and-go traffic and idling. Even the way you park matters. Don't waste five minutes

circling a crowded lot for a spot near the door. Park in the first open space you see and walk; you'll save fuel, reduce frustration, and get a bit of extra movement in your day.

Use apps like GasBuddy or Waze to scout the cheapest stations along your existing route. For insurance, consider telematics programs that monitor your driving habits; if you're already driving gently to save gas, you might as well get a discount on your premiums for being a safe driver.

Abarth announces changes to 600e range

Abarth has announced a significant evolution of its electric lineup with the introduction of two new trim levels for the 600e range: the Turismo and the flagship Competizione.

These new variants are set to replace the previous Abarth 600e and the limited-run Scorpionissima launch edition, streamlining the brand's offering while honoring the performance-driven legacy established by Carlo Abarth.

Serving as the new entry point to the range, the Abarth 600e Turismo is priced at £33,995 on-the-road. Engineered for drivers who prioritize everyday sportiness and an effortless athletic style, the Turismo delivers a robust 240 HP. It successfully bridges the gap between daily usability and the unmistakable, aggressive character that enthusiasts expect from the Scorpion brand.

For those seeking uncompromising performance, the Abarth 600e Competizione stands as the new high-water mark for the manufacturer. Developed in close collaboration with Stellantis Motorsport, this flagship model is priced at £37,995. It features a powerful 207kW electric motor that produces 280



HP, enabling a 0-62 mph acceleration time of just 5.85 seconds and a top speed of 124 mph. The Competizione is built upon the advanced Perfo eCMP platform, a state-of-the-art architecture derived directly from motorsport expertise.

The technical specifications of the Competizione reflect its racing DNA through high-performance hardware. It comes equipped with a Torsen limited-slip differential, Alcon monoblock calipers, and

vented discs to ensure superior braking stability and a sporty pedal feel. Inside, the cabin features lightweight Sabelt sports seats designed for maximum support during dynamic driving and a premium Alcantara finish. To ensure maximum grip, the car is fitted with Michelin tires developed from Formula E technology, which also prioritize noise reduction and environmental efficiency.

Visually, the Competizione makes a bold statement with a

striking two-tone livery that pairs a vivid orange body with a contrasting black roof. This aesthetic, combined with exclusive side graphics and an aerodynamically sculpted silhouette, highlights the vehicle's muscular stance. By combining cutting-edge electric technology with hardware traditionally reserved for the track, Abarth continues to project its racing spirit into a new era of electrification, catering to "forever young" drivers who refuse to sacrifice thrills for practicality.

Convertible Cruise Control

With the NI summer finally on the horizon, there is no better way to soak up the fleeting sunshine than from the driver's seat of a drop-top.

Whether you are looking for a nimble weekend toy for country lanes or a refined cruiser for a trip to the coast, the current UK market offers a fantastic range of options that balance style, performance and open-air thrills. From affordable legends to the latest electric disruptors, here are the top five convertible cars to buy for the 2026 summer season.

1. Mazda MX-5

The Mazda MX-5 remains the gold standard for anyone seeking pure, unadulterated driving pleasure without breaking the bank. Now well into its current generation, it continues to champion the "less is more" philosophy with its featherweight chassis and perfectly balanced rear-wheel-drive setup. The manual soft-top can be tossed back in seconds with one hand, making it ideal for the unpredictable UK weather. While it isn't the most practical car for a weekly shop, its legendary reliability and mechanical connection make every trip to the corner shop feel like a stage in a rally. On the road price from: £28,585

2. MINI Cooper Convertible

For those who want a bit more personality and room for more than one passenger, the new MINI Cooper Convertible is a quintessential summer choice. It retains the iconic



"go-kart" handling that has made the brand a staple on British roads, but with a more sophisticated interior and updated tech for 2026. The Union Jack-themed fabric roof can be opened partially as a sunroof or retracted fully in under 20 seconds, even while driving at low speeds. It is the perfect urban-friendly convertible—stylish, zippy, and surprisingly premium inside. On the road price from: £28,715

3. BMW 4 Series Convertible

If you are looking for a "proper" four-seater that doesn't compromise on luxury or motorway refinement, the BMW 4 Series Convertible is difficult to beat. It has moved away from the heavy folding hard-tops of the past in favour of a sophisticated fabric roof that is significantly lighter, helping the car feel more

agile in the corners. The interior is a masterclass in ergonomics, featuring BMW's latest curved display and high-quality materials throughout. With the "Air Collar" system blowing warm air around your neck, you can even enjoy roof-down driving on those cooler British summer evenings. On the road price from: £53,785

4. Mercedes-Benz CLE Cabriolet

The Mercedes-Benz CLE Cabriolet is the newest addition to the brand's lineup, effectively replacing both the old C-Class and E-Class convertibles to offer a single, highly refined package. It focuses heavily on comfort and elegance, making it perhaps the best long-distance cruiser on this list. It comes as standard with the Aircap system—an electric wind deflector on the windshield—and the Airscarf neck-level heating,

ensuring the cabin stays calm and warm even at motorway speeds. It is the definitive choice for those who want to arrive at their destination feeling as fresh as when they left. On the road price from: £54,495

5. MG Cyberster

The MG Cyberster is the "wildcard" of 2026 and represents a bold new era for the British-born brand. As a fully electric two-seater sports car, it offers a silent, high-performance alternative to the traditional petrol-powered roadster. Its most striking features are undoubtedly the electric scissor doors and the futuristic, wrap-around digital cockpit. With a 0-62mph time that can rival genuine supercars in its top-spec GT trim, the Cyberster proves that the future of open-top motoring can be just as exciting as its heritage-filled past. On the road price from: £54,995

New Nissan Micra EV

Nissan's iconic MICRA returns for its sixth generation in late 2025, marking a significant shift as the model becomes a fully-connected, pure electric vehicle.

Designed in London with European drivers in mind, this new iteration maintains the car's stylish, unpretentious heritage while embracing zero-emission mobility. Its arrival serves as a cornerstone of Nissan's broader strategy to launch four new electric models in Europe by 2027.

The exterior design is assertive and robust, featuring an SUV-inspired stance and 18-inch wheels as standard across all grades. Notable design elements include a choreographed "welcome wink" from the LED headlights and a distinctive "ice cream scoop" indent along the side panels. To ensure a personalized look, Nissan offers 14 different exterior colour combinations, including sophisticated two-tone options with black or grey roofs.

Inside, the cabin

emphasizes understated elegance and subtle nods to Japanese heritage, such as a Mount Fuji silhouette integrated into the storage space.

The driver-centric interior is anchored by dual 10.1-inch high-resolution screens for instrumentation and infotainment. Despite its compact footprint of under four meters, the five-door configuration provides a spacious interior with 326 liters of trunk capacity, which expands to 1,106 liters when the rear seats are folded.

Performance is delivered via two battery options: a 40kWh unit providing 192 miles of range and a 52kWh version offering up to 253 miles. Built on the specialized AmpR platform, the MICRA is engineered for agility, utilizing a multi-link rear suspension and weighing as little as 1,400kg. Charging is highly

efficient, with 100kW DC fast-charging capability allowing a 15% to 80% charge in just 30 minutes. Standard features like a heat pump and Vehicle-to-Load (V2L) technology further enhance its practical appeal.

The driving experience is highly customizable through four distinct modes—Comfort, Sport, Eco, and Perso—and includes Nissan's e-Pedal

for seamless one-pedal urban driving. Connectivity is a priority, featuring Google built-in services for voice-controlled navigation and app integration. Safety is equally comprehensive, with the ProPilot assist suite providing lane-keeping, adaptive cruise control, and a wide array of emergency braking and monitoring systems to ensure a secure and intuitive journey.

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DESIGNING A SOPHISTICATED SUMMER OUTDOOR KITCHEN

The backyard has undergone a fundamental architectural shift, evolving from a mere patch of grass into a fully realized extension of the home's footprint.

Today's sophisticated outdoor kitchen is about bringing the high-end utility of the indoors out into the open air. This transition toward the "garden room" reflects a broader desire to maximize our living space, treating the patio not as an occasional luxury, but as the primary hub for culinary creativity and social connection throughout the warmer months.

The hallmark of this modern evolution is the seamless integration of professional-grade appliances that go far beyond the standard barbecue. Homeowners are increasingly investing in modular setups that include wood-fired pizza ovens, specialized smokers, and even outdoor-rated wine fridges and dishwashers. The goal is complete

autonomy from the main house; a well-designed outdoor kitchen allows the host to prepare, cook, and clean without ever having to break the flow of conversation by retreating indoors. By installing integrated prep sinks and durable stone countertops, the backyard becomes a self-sustaining ecosystem that can handle everything from a quiet Tuesday night dinner to a full-scale summer soiree.

To make these expansive spaces feel intentional rather than cluttered, designers are leaning heavily into the concept of "zoning." Just as an open-plan interior relies on rugs and lighting to

define the dining area from the lounge, the sophisticated backyard uses architectural elements to create distinct environments. A pergola might define the cooking zone, while a transition to oversized porcelain pavers or a weather-resistant outdoor rug signals the move into a conversation pit or dining area. This strategic layout prevents the space from feeling like a vast, empty deck and instead imbues it with the cosy, structured feel of a traditional home, providing "rooms" that offer both sun-drenched exposure and shaded retreat.

Materiality plays a crucial role in ensuring

these spaces remain aspirational rather than high-maintenance. The current trend favours "living finishes" and rugged textures that age gracefully under the sun and rain. We are seeing a move toward Dekton or granite surfaces that shrug off UV rays, paired with cabinetry made from marine-grade polymers or powder-coated stainless steel that can withstand a sudden summer downpour. When these durable foundations are softened with performance fabrics and clever lighting—such as dimmable LEDs tucked into masonry or oversized solar lanterns—the result is



an environment that feels just as polished at midnight as it does at high noon.

We are no longer content to simply "cook outside"; we want to live outside. By investing in high-

quality infrastructure and thoughtful design, the modern summer home transforms the backyard into a sanctuary of "Golden Hour" luxury. It is a space that invites us to slow

down, linger over a meal, and enjoy the theatre of outdoor cooking, proving that the best seat in the house might actually be the one located just past the sliding glass doors.

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Make your windows sparkle this summer

Windows are often the most neglected surface when it comes to deep cleaning. Most people approach the task with a bottle of blue liquid and a roll of paper towels, only to find that once the sun hits the glass, it looks like a Jackson Pollock painting made of lint and streaks.

Achieving a professional-grade finish doesn't require a background in industrial cleaning, but it does require a shift in strategy. The goal is to move beyond merely moving dirt around and instead focus on complete suspension

and removal of debris. The most effective cleaning solution is often the simplest one residing under your kitchen sink. A bucket of warm water mixed with a few drops of high-quality liquid dish soap is the industry standard for a reason.

Dish soap is specifically engineered to break down grease and lift organic material without the aggressive evaporation rates found in alcohol-based sprays. If you are dealing with particularly stubborn mineral deposits or "hard water" spots, adding a splash of white vinegar can provide the necessary acidity to break those bonds. Beyond the solution, you should retire the paper towels in favour of a professional-grade squeegee and a handful of clean microfibre cloths. Paper towels are essentially made of wood pulp, which leaves behind a microscopic trail of lint that ruins the "invisible"

look of clean glass. The actual cleaning process begins with thoroughly wetting the window using a soft scrubber or a sponge to loosen the accumulated grime. Once the glass is fully lubricated, the squeegee becomes your primary tool for moisture removal. Start at the top corner and pull the blade across or down the glass in a single, fluid motion. The secret that distinguishes amateurs from pros is the "dry-to-wet" contact; you must wipe the rubber blade of the squeegee with a dry cloth after every single pass. This prevents the dirty water from the

previous stroke from being dragged back across the clean surface, which is the primary cause of those dreaded vertical streaks. When it comes to window cleaning, the weather is your greatest ally or your worst enemy. It is a common mistake to wait for a bright, sunny day to clean the glass, but direct sunlight causes the cleaning solution to dry almost instantly. This rapid evaporation leaves behind soap residue before you can even reach for your squeegee. Instead, aim for a cloudy day or a time when the windows are in the shade. This gives you the "open time" necessary to work the

solution and remove it properly. Once the main pane is clear, use a dry microfibre cloth to "detail" the edges. Water often hides in the corners of the frames or along the seals, and if left alone, it will eventually crawl back onto the glass or drip down to create spots. By running a dry cloth along the perimeter of the frame, you ensure a crisp finish. It may feel like more effort than a quick spray-and-wipe, but the results are far more durable. A properly squeegeed window stays clean longer because there is no static-charged paper towel residue left behind to attract new dust.

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Driveway ideas for maximum kerb appeal

Your driveway serves more than one purpose. While it's a convenient and safe place to park your vehicle, it also plays a lead role in creating a lasting first impression. Here's a round-up of some key types.

Gravel driveways. Gravel driveways offer a charming and cost-effective way to revamp your driveway. Gravel and stone come in a variety of colours and sizes, providing the opportunity to fully customise the look to suit your style. They also pair well with other materials such as stepping stones, block paved borders, and stamped concrete. In addition, gravel provides great natural drainage and is easy to maintain. You can cleverly combine gravel with block paving to stop the gravel from spraying across the pavement.



Resin driveways. Resin driveways have become increasingly popular with UK homeowners looking for modern front driveway ideas as they offer a contemporary appearance and incredible durability. The mixture of resin and aggregates creates a seamless surface that's resistant to weeds and cracking, with an array of colours and patterns available, you can easily match your home's exterior. Resin driveways naturally drain water and are environmentally friendly. Resin's neat and smooth finish is stunning all by itself or with a few key features. Consider the shape of your resin driveway and whether you'd like any cut-outs for plants, trees, water features, or decorative edging. Due to resin's versatility, the sky is your limit.

and tar, whereas asphalt is a mix of aggregates and bitumen. The latter offers a better finish and smoother surface compared to tarmac. The finish of tarmac can be enhanced through 'chip sealing'. This is when tar is poured onto a gravel base, stones are added, and it's pressed with roller equipment. Tarmac and asphalt are cost-effective to install and pair well with a number of aesthetics: They look great alongside patterned bricks. Create a stunning look by contrasting tarmac or asphalt with lighter stone. Soften the dark tones by including a lush lawn or greenery in your tarmac driveway design.

maintenance driveways that require minimal upkeep. Coloured concrete is great if you want to add dimension and interest, such as a cream border or chequered patterns. It's also malleable when installed correctly. For example, it can make patterns when poured into moulds and can be sectioned and paired with other materials, such as aggregate or slate. Stamped concrete can give the appearance of a different material such as stone or brick for a fraction of the cost.

Block paving driveways. Block paving creates a classic and elegant first impression. It's usually made from concrete, which is engineered in a factory for consistency and accuracy. For this reason, block paving is a durable and versatile option for your

driveway. A popular design trend with block paving is using light grey blocks to border and 'edge' the drive and any central features, such as a roundabout, lawn, water feature, or pathway. A dark grey paving block is then used to fill in the remaining area, offering a great aesthetic that stands the test of time. Whether you use one type of block, two-tones, mixed, or a combination of materials, block paving is a decorative option that offers a lovely finish. Monoblock paving driveways incorporate two-tones of block paving to create patterns and interest. The two tones can be two different materials or two colours of the same material.

For more information see <https://www.checkatrade.com/blog/ideas/driveway-ideas/>

Tarmac driveways. Tarmac or asphalt driveways are durable and long-lasting. Tarmac is a mix of aggregates

Concrete driveways. Poured concrete is one of the most common driveway materials on the market. It's used to create low-

Planning a Building Project: who should be on-site when

Successfully sequencing tradespeople is fundamental to a smooth building project. Starting with the groundwork, the initial phase involves clearing the site, excavating foundations, and laying essential drainage.

Groundworkers and foundation specialists are paramount at this stage, followed by drainage experts to ensure proper sewer connections. This foundational work sets the stage for the structural integrity of the entire build.

Once the groundwork is complete, the focus shifts to creating the building's shell. Bricklayers and structural engineers, if needed, erect the walls and steel supports. Roofers then make the structure watertight, and window and door installers seal the building, protecting

it from the elements. This phase is crucial for establishing the basic form and weatherproofing of the building.

The next stage, "first fix," involves installing the internal infrastructure. Electricians and plumbers lay the groundwork for essential services within the walls and floors. HVAC engineers install ducting, while carpenters frame internal walls and prepare for staircases. Insulation installers then ensure the building is energy-efficient. A rough plastering may also occur

at this point, preparing the walls for the final finishes.

"Second fix" is where the finishing touches are applied. Electricians and plumbers complete their installations, fitting their fixtures and connecting appliances. Carpenters install doors, skirting boards, and fitted kitchens. Tilers, plasterers, and painters then work their magic, transforming the interior spaces. Finally, flooring installers lay the chosen flooring materials, completing the interior finish.

The final phase involves

external works and landscaping. Pavers and landscapers create outdoor spaces, while fencers install any necessary boundaries. General labourers handle the final cleanup, ensuring the site is tidy and ready for occupancy. Throughout the entire process, flexibility and effective communication are vital. Coordinating inspections at required stages and understanding the project's critical path are also essential for avoiding delays and ensuring a successful outcome.

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KITCHEN RENOVATION PLANNING GUIDE:

The kitchen is the heart of the home. Breathing new life into this space can create a whole new feel within your property, as well as add up to 10% to your home's value.

Every kitchen renovation starts with an idea. Perhaps you've always had your 'dream kitchen' in your head and need some help making that vision a reality. Maybe you're bursting with inspiration from home interior magazines and kitchen showrooms but aren't sure how to narrow down your choices, or perhaps your kitchen renovation project is currently a completely blank canvas!



Colour Planning. Colour has a huge impact on how we engage with a space. And it's the combination of colours – otherwise known as a colour palette – that will achieve a desired look or feel. A colour wheel is a helpful tool when deciding a colour palette for your new kitchen. Here are some of the most common options.

Tonal. Choose one colour as your 'base colour' and add various tones of that colour throughout your room. **Harmonious.** Choose a colour on the colour wheel and work its neighbouring colours into your scheme. The colours complement each other without being too similar. **Complementary.** Choose a colour on the colour wheel and find its complementary colour on the opposite side of the wheel to make a statement with your colour scheme.

Lighting design. Lighting has many functions. Of course, its main purpose is to light a space, but well-considered lighting can add to the style of your kitchen and have a major impact on the mood

and atmosphere too. Kitchen lighting should aim to marry design and function. When planning the lighting for your kitchen renovation, aim to tick off at least one from each of these categories: **General lighting.** General (or ambient) lighting will spread light around the whole kitchen, via a ceiling light or spotlights, for example. **Task lighting.** You need task lighting in your kitchen to help perform certain tasks. For example, lights above the worktops where you'll prep food. **Spot lighting.** Spot (or accent) lighting works to draw your attention to a particular area, for example, artwork on a wall, a bookcase in a recess, or glassware in a cabinet. **Atmospheric lighting.** Atmospheric (or decorative) lighting will help to achieve the right mood for your kitchen space, by using dimmable lamps above a dining area, for example.

Kitchen cabinet inspiration. The kitchen cabinets you choose will have a huge influence on the overall look of your kitchen. But it's not just about style. The quality of the material, the finish

you opt for, and special features (wine racks, spice drawers etc) will all have an impact on your budget. To help you select the best kitchen cabinets for your kitchen renovation, take a look at the six main styles available.

Shaker-style. An affordable, classic, and traditional style of kitchen cabinet that has always been popular. **Glass-fronted.** Glass-fronted cabinets help to display the items within, and bounce light around the room too. It's common to mix and match glass-fronted cabinets with other styles.

Tongue and groove. The texture and warmth of tongue and groove cabinets give the feel of a relaxed, country cottage style kitchen. It's also a popular design element in a Scandi-style kitchen.

Flat-fronted. For a simple and minimalist look in a contemporary kitchen, choose flat-fronted cabinets with no panels or frames. Plywood cabinets will help to achieve an organic, warm kitchen. They're also a very cost-effective choice. Natural (unfinished) wood. For a truly rustic feel, opt for natural wood cabinets in your kitchen. These are popular with homeowners striving for a relaxed, informal style kitchen.

Your kitchen worktop needs to be tough and hard-wearing, unlikely to chip, scratch, or be damaged by heat. And crucially, it needs to be affordable. While quartz and granite worktops typically sit at the higher end of the spectrum, materials such as laminate make a super versatile and cost-effective option.

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