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Pictured at the launch of the Home Heating Oil Support Scheme in Belfast are (l-r): Raymond Gormley, Consumer Council for Northern Ireland; Fiona Magee, Advice NI; Communities Minister Gordon Lyons; Nicole Lappin, Chair, NI Housing Executive; and David Blevings, Northern Ireland Oil Federation.

£100 HOME HEATING OIL SUPPORT SCHEME GOES LIVE FOR APPLICATIONS

The £100 Home Heating Oil Support Scheme, announced recently by Communities Minister Gordon Lyons, is now live for applications.

The £100 digital pre-paid card scheme will support around 340,000 households who use oil as their main source of heating.

Minister Lyons is urging anyone who may be eligible for the support to make an application.

Minister Lyons said:

"The £100 Home Heating Oil Support Scheme is now live for applications. I am urging all those who believe they may be eligible, or those assisting them, to check the criteria on nidirect and make an application. The process is easy and fast.

"The digital pre-paid

card will go some way to meeting the challenge of rising fuel costs and will benefit those who need it most as we head into the colder months."

One digital card per household will be payable where applicants use oil as their main source of heating and receive

a qualifying income-related benefit, or a disability benefit, or have an annual income for single people or couples (including pensioners) of less than £30,000 after allowable deductions.

Continued on page 6

New funding to help end violence against women and girls

Belfast-based community and voluntary organisations are invited to apply for grants to support projects aimed at ending violence against women and girls.

The Local Change Fund grants are administered by Belfast City Council, and are one of 11 local funds set up to support the Northern Ireland Executive's Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG).

Grants are available for projects working to change the culture, behaviours and attitudes that are a breeding ground for violence against women and girls. Projects which specifically work with men and boys to raise awareness and understanding of the EVAWG strategy, promote positive masculinity and support men to become allies in EVAWG are particularly welcome.

An online information session about these grants was held recently.

This is the third year of Belfast City Council

delivering EVAWG Local Change Fund grants. Previous years have seen successful projects change minds, raise awareness, and teach people all over the city about EVAWG and its insidious effect on our society. Projects have focused on working with sports teams, educating and learning through discussion, designing educational games, and creating EVAWG Ambassadors who can open conversations about violence and answer questions from their peers. Projects funded under this year's scheme must be delivered by the end of March 2027.

More details on Belfast City Council's actions to end violence against women and girls can be seen on the council website at belfastcity.gov.uk/endviolence



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BELFAST DAD TAKES ON WORLD RECORD ROWING CHALLENGE

A Belfast Dad and school Vice Principal, is preparing to take on a gruelling 22-mile solo rowing challenge, from Carrickfergus to Portpatrick in Scotland, in an attempt to break the current world record and to raise funds for the Neo Natal Unit at the Ulster Hospital.

In June, Rory and Victoria O'Connor's son Patrick was born four weeks prematurely and developed respiratory distress syndrome, requiring seven days of specialist care in the Neo Natal Unit.

For the family, it was a "terrifying time", but now, baby Patrick is thriving at home with his mum, dad and big sister Mollie, thanks to the dedicated care and compassion of the Ulster Hospital Neo Natal Team.

Rory, an international rower and member of Lagan Scullers Club, said the care Patrick received during those difficult early days left a lasting impression on him.

Rory explained, "When Patrick was born, he was quite unwell. He was struggling to breathe and spent time in the Neo Natal Unit. The care and compassion he, as well as my wife Victoria, received was unbelievable. It really blew me away. They saved Patrick's life."

"I remember coming home and saying to Victoria, 'We need to give something back'."

Vice Principal of Strangford Integrated



College, Rory is now preparing to put his rowing experience to the ultimate test, as he attempts to row from Carrickfergus to Portpatrick in Scotland - and attempt to break the current world record!

The existing record stands at three hours and 35 minutes and was set in 1997 by Belfast man John Murray.

Rory said his passion for rowing provided the perfect opportunity to raise funds and give something back to the team who cared for his son, "Given

my background in rowing, I thought it was a perfect vehicle to use to fundraise and ultimately give back to the Neo Natal Unit.

"I am hoping to break the current world record of three hours and 35 minutes. I am now waiting for the right weather window to complete the challenge."

With Patrick now very much settled at home with mum dad and big sister Mollie, Rory reflected on how emotional it was coming back to the Neo Natal Unit to meet with

staff ahead of his rowing challenge.

"All funds raised from the row, minus the boat safety costs, will go directly to the Ulster Hospital Neo Natal Unit. We cannot thank the staff enough."

Neo Natal Sister Gemma Cummins stated, "It is such a generous donation that Rory is going to provide for us. It means a lot to us and will enable us to enhance our care and experience to families that are already going through their own Neo Natal journey and for the families to come."

LEARNING

FAMILY

COMMUNITY

Cregagh Primary School

WEDNESDAY 13TH JANUARY 2027

OPEN NIGHT

There will be two separate sessions; an earlier, quieter session for prospective P1 families (5pm - 6pm) followed by the main session (6:00pm - 7:30pm).

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- Teachers have high expectations of the children's behaviour, contributions and engagement in their learning.
- Children feel safe, well cared for and enjoy their learning.
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Belfast goes to Westminster to drive forward the city’s ongoing transformation

Lord Mayor of Belfast, Councillor Róis-Máire Donnelly, led a cross-party delegation to Westminster today, recently to make the case for a transformative Belfast Place-Based Growth Fund, ahead of the Chancellor’s Budget Statement on 26 November.

If secured, the Fund would address long-standing barriers to development, enabling Belfast to fulfil its role as Northern Ireland’s primary economic driver and a key contributor to UK growth.

The visit, co-ordinated by Belfast City Council and led by the Lord Mayor and Chief Executive, John Walsh, also included input from all four Belfast MPs – Gavin Robinson, John Finucane, Claire Hanna and Paul Maskey.

Through a combination of housing-led and mixed-use regeneration, strategic infrastructure investment and targeted support for catalytic innovation and development projects, the delegation highlighted how the Fund would unlock underutilised land, attract private investment and create the conditions for sustained, inclusive economic growth.

They stressed how it would build on existing Belfast Region City Deal investments and the city’s innovation and service strengths, maximising their economic impact and long-term value.



Councillor Donnelly said: “Belfast has so much potential to unlock, but we continue to experience substantial infrastructure and regeneration deficits.

“Historic under-investment, land assembly challenges, infrastructure constraints and development viability gaps have stalled delivery and are limiting our ability to compete in the global marketplace and drive growth in our city and wider region.

“Our city has such a compelling investment proposition, just look at our talent, our strengths that we’re boosting through the

Belfast Region City Deal in areas like FinTech and life and health sciences, advanced manufacturing and the creative industries, and our plans for housing-led and mixed-use regeneration, including increasing city centre living.

“Investing in Belfast through a transformative Belfast Place-Based Growth Fund makes sound business sense – we’re uniquely positioned and ready to deliver.”

The Belfast Place-Based Growth Fund focuses on opportunities which will benefit both the city and the

whole of Northern Ireland.

The Council, with the support of all political parties, is seeking targeted investment – comparative to funding available in other UK cities – which will better equip Belfast to drive growth for Northern Ireland and the UK.

The Fund has been informed by significant engagement with a range of cross-sector stakeholders, in line with the recent Belfast City Centre Regeneration & Investment Strategy Stocktake findings, as well as objectives within The Belfast Agenda – the city’s community plan.



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10:30am - 11:30am

- ✓ 10:30am Principal's address
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Continued from page 1

Noyona Chundur, Chief Executive of the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland, said: “Now that the £100 Home Heating Oil Support Scheme is open, we would encourage all eligible households to apply. With household budgets continuing to be stretched by ongoing cost pressures, this support can help ease some of the financial burden and contribute towards the cost of home heating oil which has gone up in price over the last few days.

“Consumers can also use the Consumer Council’s free daily Home Heating Oil Price Checker to

compare prices across Northern Ireland and help ensure households are making a more informed decision when ordering home heating oil.”

To apply or for more information on the scheme go to nidirect: Home Heating Oil Support Scheme

Those needing more assistance can contact staff across the Jobs and Benefits Office network or contact the Home Heating Oil Support Scheme helpline on 0800 072 0266.

The Department’s Make the Call and Veterans Support Line NI services are ready to provide support.

The scheme is now open for applications and will close for new applications on March 31, 2027.

NEW EXTERIOR INTERPRETATION AT THE ASSEMBLY ROOMS

For more than 250 years, the Assembly Rooms has been part of the lives of countless people, both locals and visitors to Belfast. Today, ongoing research and conservation are revealing new aspects of its history and encouraging the public to share their experiences and memories of the building.

Earlier this year, Belfast City Council partnered with World Monuments Fund (WMF) on a conservation project to safeguard the Assembly Rooms, including a conservation management plan by Belfast-based James Grieve Architects. The plan provides a framework for the building’s future conservation, maintenance and sustainable use.

Research undertaken as part of the process has informed a new trilingual – English, Irish, and Ulster Scots – interpretative scheme of 29 panels installed on the building exterior.

The interpretation traces the historical

development of the building from the 18th century to the present day, beginning with its establishment as an Exchange, or market hall, and its evolution into the Assembly Rooms at the heart of Georgian Belfast’s social scene. It continues through its later use as the headquarters of the Belfast Banking Company, until the bank’s closure in 2000.

The new interpretation, conceived in collaboration with James Grieve Architects, highlights some of the seminal figures associated with the building, including Dr James McDonnell (1763–1845), known as the



‘Father of Belfast Medicine’, who helped shape the city’s medical, cultural and intellectual life and organised the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792. It also features Martha McTier (1742–1837), a prominent figure in Belfast’s reforming

culture who helped establish one of the city’s earliest maternity charities and contributed to the intellectual life of Enlightenment Belfast. Also, a collaboration with the Royal Society of Ulster Architects (RSUA) showcases three architects who shaped

the building.

As part of the ongoing research into the building’s history, WMF is collecting memories, photographs and stories that can help reveal its more recent past.

Did you visit the bank, work in the building or attend an event? Do you have a family connection to the Assembly Rooms? The memories, photographs and stories collected will help record the building’s more recent social history, particularly its long period of use as a bank. As online banking has reduced the need to visit bank branches in person, the everyday experiences associated with these spaces are increasingly becoming

part of the historical record. Capturing these memories will contribute to a fuller understanding of the building and its significance, while informing its ongoing conservation and interpretation.

After more than 250 years at the heart of Belfast, the Assembly Rooms stands at the beginning of a new chapter. As it has throughout its remarkable history, the building continues to adapt and evolve, ready to serve future generations of Belfast.

The history of the building is still being written – share your memories: <https://www.wmf.org/assemblyroomsmemories>

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Student safety campaign launched

The Police Service of Northern Ireland, in partnership with Queen’s University Belfast, Ulster University, Belfast Metropolitan College, Belfast City Council and SoS Bus has launched its student safety campaign.

The campaign aims to encourage safe and respectful behaviour and provide an opportunity for students to learn more about their local police.

As part of outreach work, officers will be providing a visible police presence across the various student accommodation areas and working closely with local communities to keep everyone safe.

Launching the campaign, Chief Inspector Loreen Glenn said: “We look forward to welcoming new and returning students to Belfast for the start of this academic year.

“The city has a vibrant student community with some of the most prestigious universities and colleges around the world. Belfast is an outstanding city in which to grow both through education and personally, and we will be on hand to keep all students safe during their time of study



and ensure responsible behaviour.

“We want all students

to enjoy a positive experience of living in the city, part of which is to be

aware of their own safety and how we and our partners can help them.”

Gabrielle Smyth, Interim Residential Life Manager from Ulster University, said: “Starting or returning to university should be a positive and exciting experience, and feeling safe and comfortable in the city and communities around our campuses is an important part of that.

“By working closely with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, our education partners and local communities, we can help students enjoy everything university life and Belfast have to offer, while encouraging a shared responsibility for creating safe and respectful communities.”

For practical advice for students on how to stay safe and protect property, check out the online resources at www.psn.police.uk/student-safety

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Investment in Belfast Urban Garden reaps rich harvest

An evaluation of The BUG (Belfast’s Urban Garden), carried out in partnership with Belfast Healthy Cities, has clearly demonstrated the benefits of investing in urban growing projects.

Delivered by Belfast City Council and The Conservation Volunteers as a ‘Demonstrator’ Project from spring 2024 until summer 2025 with funding from the Department for Infrastructure’s Blue-Green Infrastructure fund and Public Health Agency, The BUG was designed to test how a temporarily vacant or “meanwhile” space could be converted into an urban social garden in Belfast city centre and generate shared learning for future greening initiatives.

The project engaged almost 3,000 visitors, created hundreds of volunteering opportunities and supported some of the city’s most vulnerable individuals and groups.

Identified as a key action arising through the Belfast Healthy Cities’ Greening the City Advisory Group, the ‘Grey to Green’ programme emerged from a recognised lack of green space in the city centre, and sought to help meet the city’s ambition to make Belfast greener, more attractive, and more people-friendly as set out in A Bolder Vision for



Belfast.

Participants described The BUG as an “oasis” in a grey, concrete area, which they valued as warm, welcoming, and interactive, distinct from a conventional park because people could “do” things, meet others, and take part in a positive activity.

Those taking part in The BUG’s Saturday Green Gym sessions reported their pride in seeing a meanwhile space used for nature-based activity rather than remaining derelict or becoming a

car park, with the site encouraging conversations about improvements to the city centre and how it is used and enjoyed. As well gaining practical experience in growing food, herbs and flowers, participants learned about biodiversity, shared produce and engaged in building practical infrastructure, including a polytunnel.

The focus group described consistent mental wellbeing benefits: feeling happier, with a sense of lightness after

spending time in the garden. One participant shared: “Even if I was having the worst day, I always left The BUG feeling like a weight had been lifted.”

The Conservation Volunteers are reusing materials from The BUG and are keen to explore further opportunities for city centre greening.

To request a copy of The BUG evaluation report, or to find out more about how your organisation could set up an urban garden, email belfasti@belfastcity.gov.uk



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Wed 23rd 3:00

Wed 23rd 7:30

Sat 26th 3:00

Sun 27th 3:00

Mon 28th 3:00

December 26

Mon 28th 7:30

Tue 29th 3:00

Tue 29th 7:30

Wed 30th 3:00

Wed 30th 7:30

Thu 31st 3:00

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Creating your best smile with Implants & Cosmetic Dentistry at Morrison Dental Clinic

Now coming into its 3rd year of business in 2027 - Morrison Dental is thriving at 95 Saintfield Road, Belfast.

The Principal Dentist and practice owner is Dr Richard Morrison who has a passion for all things dentistry - implant and cosmetic dentistry in particular!

Dr Morrison says:

"You can really change someone's life through their smile. Seeing their reaction after showing them their finished result in the mirror is priceless. The change you see in a patient, giving them their smile and confidence, it is not just an aesthetic change but also gives a psychological change which is so rewarding!"



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treatment later on.

Significant investment has already been made to ensure that the practice remains at the forefront of technology to improve the patient experience. This includes an intra-oral scanner, which uses 3D photo imaging to scan the mouth, avoiding the need for taking moulds of your teeth. Treatment can then be planned digitally and with greater accuracy than ever, achieve perfectly fitting labwork such as crowns, veneers, bleaching trays etc. Another addition is a recently-installed CBCT scanner, used when there is a need for more information than what traditional 2D x-rays can offer, such as 3D visualisation of jaw bone for optimal planning for implant placement.

Dr Morrison is a member of the Irish Academy of Aesthetic Dentistry and the Association of Dental Implantology, and is always reading articles and attending courses to stay up to date with the latest advancements!

He says:

"I believe that we are at an exciting time in dentistry, with more and more technological advances which can improve what is possible for our patients. I feel as a dentist in the modern age we must continually learn and improve our practices otherwise we will be left behind!"

The growing team (so far!) consists of five dentists, five nurses, dental hygienist Claire, receptionist Shauna, Yuko (Richard's wife) who does a lot of the work behind the scenes!

Morrison Dental Clinic is conveniently located at 95 Saintfield Road (not far from Forestside), and offers free parking available on site! For your appointment Tel: 028 9070 3215



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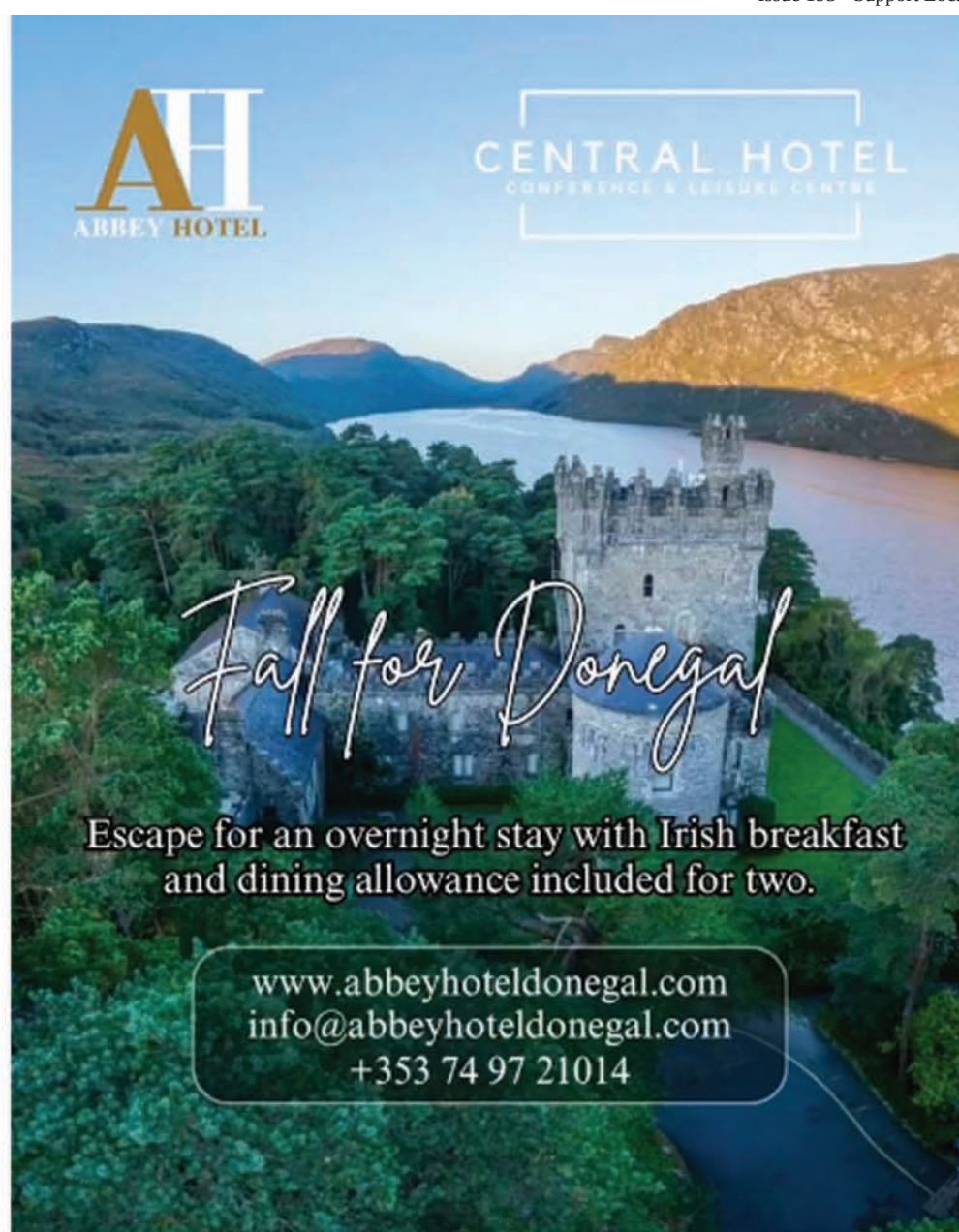


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Discover a peaceful stay by the coast at Cultra Coastal Airbnb. This charming white coastal house offers sea views and a warm welcome and all within just a five minutes walk from the coast.

The setting combines heritage character with modern comfort. Inside rooms feature floral wallpaper and crisp white bedding. Each stay provides privacy and peace of mind. The Airbnb offers two private rooms with private bathrooms. Every bedroom has a lock on the door and a TV. Guests benefit from wifi and free parking on the premises. Exterior security cameras provide reassurance throughout the property.

Location is everything here. Royal Belfast Golf Club lies just across the road. The Royal North of Ireland Yacht Club is also nearby. The wider area is rich with attractions. The



Culloden Estate and Spa is a moment away by car. The Ulster Folk and Transport Museum is also nearby. Helen's Bay is close for seaside walks.

Inside guests can enjoy

shared living spaces with character. A working fireplace creates a cosy focal point on cooler evenings!

Contact host Alana on (0)78 5119 1059 or email alanamcpeak@hotmail.com.

co.uk for information and booking. This coastal retreat suits couples and solo travellers seeking calm and convenience. It offers sea air and central access at an elegant address.

Small Steps can boost a BIG Growth in Confidence!

Taekwon-Do NI is helping children and adults across Northern Ireland grow in Strength & Confidence!!

The Organisation is part of the United Kingdom Taekwon-Do Council and affiliated to the World ITF Taekwon-Do Council. It runs Clubs in Community Centres, Leisure Centres & Church Halls across Northern Ireland. The President for Northern Ireland is Mr Leo Maguire, VI Degree. Leo is also the National Coach and a member of the Northern Ireland Council of Taekwon-Do.

Tiger Cubs is the level for primary school age children. No experience is necessary to join and classes welcome small children from Age 3 right up to adulthood. Mums and Dads can join in too with the children, training together builds family confidence and a shared achievement.

There's also Little Tiger Cubs (3 to 5 years) and Active Tigers (5 to 8 years). Taekwon-Do for the more

senior class age ranges from 9 years to adulthood. We also offer a six week Female Self-Defence course, led by Female Instructors and is perfect for young girls leaving home or going to University or for adults to combine get-fit as a new skill.

The course gives practical skills and confidence for independent living away from home. Adult classes focus on fitness and self defence and beginners are always welcome. The Clubs welcomes everybody and adapts sessions to suit all abilities and needs.

Grading is by Leo Maguire himself. This ensures consistent standards across the region. Taekwon-Do NI also provides a GCSE in Taekwon-Do with the Education Authority. It offers free trials to secondary schools as a PE alternative and FREE Taster Sessions run from Nursery



level through to High School Education.

The Active Tigers programme sums up its Ethos! Small steps bring big confidence and discipline and fun! Students learn to watch their confidence grow with each class and

for more information contact Taekwon-Do NI on 07891191494 or visit taekwondo-ni.co.uk.

A brighter, stronger tomorrow starts with the first class.

<http://www.taekwondo-ni.co.uk/>

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Autumn: Season of mists and mellow...fruiting bodies?

In his famous line of poetry, John Keats used the word 'fruitfulness', but besides all the apples, pears, rosehips and other fruits of autumn, there are also what scientists call the 'fruiting bodies' of lots of fungi (or funguses if you prefer), particularly in woodland.

What we mostly call mushrooms and toadstools which appear at this time of year in a multitude of shapes, sizes and colours, are for fungi reproduction including a simple mechanism to spread far away from the original organism, with tiny spores (the equivalent of plant seeds) falling from their undersides to blow away on a breeze.

But of course, there are variations, and for instance, puffballs (pictured) lack

an opening below the cap, so that when they break or are kicked emit clouds of dust-like spores, hence their name. An average Giant Puffball (not common here) can produce seven trillion spores. Thankfully, very few germinate, because, if they all did, it has been calculated that they would produce a mass of fungi 800 times the volume of the earth!

There are about 5 million fungi species in the world (an estimated

9,000 in Ireland) and they are hugely important underground where their main 'bodies' live, extensive thread-like masses called mycelium, which, we're learning, connect trees and other plants, exchanging nutrients and even carrying chemical or electronic messages which appear to be understood by plants. This phenomenon has been termed 'the wood wide web'.

So, when you're out walking in the countryside

this autumn, keep a lookout for puffballs, and many other fungi fruiting bodies, bearing in mind that what you're seeing are only the short-lived reproductive

organs and that what the network parents are doing under your feet is amazing, and possibly vital for plants and all natural life on earth.

JVA

Multi-million investment in new AI and Fintech Centre of Excellence at First Derivative

First Minister Michelle O'Neill, deputy First Minister Emma Little-Pengelly and Economy Minister Dr Caoimhe Archibald have announced that First Derivative is investing £15.3 million in R&D and jobs at a new AI and Fintech Centre of Excellence.

First Derivative, an EPAM company, is a global consulting firm that provides a range of solutions for the financial services industry. Its client base includes many of the world's top financial institutions.

Welcoming the investment while visiting the company's HQ in Newry, First Minister, Michelle O'Neill said: "This investment is a huge vote of confidence in Newry, our people and the potential of this city. First Derivative

has deep roots here and has shown that a world-class company can be built in Newry and compete globally.

The centre will bring together our expertise and specialist skills with AI software solutions that our clients can integrate seamlessly into their existing systems.

Speaking at the announcement in Newry, deputy First Minister Emma Little-Pengelly said: "This is great news for Newry and a real testament to the strength of

our tech talent pipeline here in Northern Ireland.

Securing this project is a clear endorsement of the skilled workforce in Newry and Belfast, our competitive business environment and growing reputation as a centre for advanced technology.

First Derivative will carry out R&D to develop new process and technology solutions for blue chip clients that will enable the company to enhance its competitiveness.

Andrew Colhoun, Head of First Derivative said: "This investment reflects our tech-first strategy, where innovation is at the heart of how we operate and deliver for our clients. We see a significant opportunity to harness advanced technologies, particularly AI, to modernise operations and improve efficiency. "Establishing our Centre of Excellence is an important step in realising that vision. The centre will bring together our expertise

and specialist skills with AI software solutions that our clients can integrate seamlessly into their existing systems." Invest NI has offered the company an R&D grant of £3,204,190, helping to secure this significant investment for Northern Ireland ahead of other potential locations.

Invest NI's R&D support for this project is part funded by the UK Government Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF).

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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.

With a simple flat fare of just £49, including ferry travel and luggage, the Belfast-Glasgow Express delivers outstanding



value. With no hidden costs and flexible travel options, passengers can pick and mix dates and times to suit their plans—making it ideal for a spontaneous spring getaway or a longer city break.

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).

Make half term the time to check your child's sight

Half term is a busy week for families, but it can also be the perfect opportunity to tick an important health check off the list - your child's eye test.

Good vision plays a vital role in a child's learning, confidence and everyday development.

From reading the board in class and concentrating on homework, to enjoying sport, screen time and hobbies, children rely on their eyesight more than they may realise.

Yet many children will not know something is wrong, because they have nothing to compare their vision with.

Paula Cunningham, Ophthalmic Director at Specsavers Connswater says: "That is why regular eye tests are so

important. An eye test can help identify short or long sight, focusing issues, squints and other concerns that may otherwise go unnoticed. Spotting these early means children can get the right support sooner, helping them feel more comfortable at school and at home."

Parents should also remember that children do not need to be able to read letters to have their eyes tested. The local experts at Specsavers Connswater use age-appropriate kids' eye tests including pictures and simple activities

featuring their exclusive Optomaster family, making appointments straightforward and reassuring for younger children.

Paula continued; "Half term is the most practical time to visit without having to work around the school day, and it gives families peace of mind before the busy term continues. With the first couple of months of the new school year over us, eyes can already be tired or showing signs of needing a check-up."

Children under 16 are entitled to free NHS-funded eye tests, and



young people aged 16 to 18 in full-time education may also be eligible. To arrange an

appointment, contact Specsavers Connswater via specsavers.co.uk/stores/belfastconnswater.

160 micro and SME businesses to invest £3.6m in innovation

Invest Northern Ireland's Business Innovation Grant (BIG) is helping 160 SMEs and micro businesses to embrace innovation and boost productivity.

Developed and delivered in partnership with Innovate NI, BIG was launched in November 2024 to help micro-businesses, sole traders and SMEs develop and bring new products, services, or processes to market.

Making the announcement while meeting with Ballynahinch based parent teacher engagement platform company, Equipple, Alison Currie, Chief Development Officer at Invest NI said: "BIG is making innovation



Pictured (L-R) are Alison Currie, Chief Development Officer, Invest NI and Stuart Henry, co-founder of Equipple.

more accessible for businesses by helping to remove financial barriers and supporting them to develop and bring new products, services, or processes to market.

The programme has also enabled us to reach a wider range of businesses, and to help more to take their first step on the innovation journey.

Alison Currie, Chief Development Officer, Invest NI

"Since launching, the grant has supported 160 companies across Northern Ireland. These businesses are planning to invest a total of £3.6m to drive innovation, increase productivity and strengthen the growth ambitions of their businesses.

"The programme has also enabled us to reach a wider range of businesses, and to help more to take their first step on the innovation journey."

Invest NI has offered the

160 companies £2.3m of financial support through BIG.

Equipple is a software platform that automates parent-teacher meeting scheduling and pupil data management. The company successfully applied to BIG in 2024.

Reflecting on the impact of BIG on his businesses, Stuart Henry, co-founder of Equipple said: "BIG has been instrumental in helping us commercialise our platform for market. As a small business, it can be challenging to dedicate the time and resources needed to do this. The funding has enabled us to gather customer feedback and develop new features that our customers desire.

We have also been able to build relationships with schools by attending EdTech events to gain valuable insights directly from educators and parents. The grant has given

us the confidence and capability to move from being a promising start-up to a sustainable, growth-focused company, giving us a strong foundation for future opportunities across the UK and other international markets.

BIG has helped business in multiple sectors across Northern Ireland such as digital and creative technologies, advanced manufacturing and life and health sciences.

Alison Currie added: "SMEs are the backbone of our economy. Often based in the heart of communities across Northern Ireland, they make a significant contribution to local prosperity, job creation and economic growth. By supporting SMEs to invest in innovation, we are strengthening their competitiveness, helping them seize new opportunities and laying the groundwork for sustainable growth right across the region."

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Recruitment Information Evening

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Time; 7pm until 9pm
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Smart Questions to ask at a School Open Day

A school open day is your best chance to look beyond the prospectus and get a feel for daily life. Arrive with a short list of questions and you will leave with clearer answers.

Start with the people. Ask pupils if they enjoy coming to school and who their favourite teachers are. Children give honest insight into culture and happiness. Talk to teachers about enthusiasm for their subject and how they track progress. Great teachers are often the reason children excel.

Explore learning in detail. Ask how the school is structured and whether classes are mixed age or single year. Find out about teaching approaches, from core maths and English to project based learning. Enquire about support for individual needs, including learning plans and specialist staff. Class size matters for attention and

confidence.

Look at the environment with care. Check classrooms, library and sports facilities. Ask if toilets are close to classrooms and if gates and doors are secure. Note cleanliness, use of technology and access to outdoor classrooms. A calm and welcoming space helps children feel safe.

Safety and wellbeing deserve direct questions. Ask about behaviour policy, bullying prevention and supervision during the day. Schools often have clear policies and zero tolerance approaches that shape respect from day one.

Ask about life beyond lessons. What clubs, trips, forest school or breakfast



clubs are offered? What opportunities exist for music, drama or sport? These build confidence and friendships.

Finish with practical details. Ask about admissions deadlines,

waiting lists and documents needed. Ask about meals, whether food is cooked on site and how allergies are handled. Ask how the school communicates with parents through newsletters or messaging.

Teachers and pupils asked to speak out about behaviour in schools

Teachers, parents and pupils across Northern Ireland are being asked to have their say on behaviour in schools as Education Minister Paul Givan launches a major Call for Evidence to help shape future policy.

The engagement exercise forms part of the Department of Education's review of behaviour policy and practice, that is currently being taken forward by Tom Bennett OBE. The review will help inform a new policy and updated guidance for schools.

Launching the Call for Evidence, Paul Givan said: "Every child deserves to learn in a safe, calm and orderly classroom where they can achieve their full potential and every teacher deserves to be able to teach without ongoing disruption."

"While many schools have high standards of behaviour, I have heard directly from teachers and school leaders that managing behaviour is becoming increasingly challenging in some classrooms."

"We cannot ignore those

concerns. Poor behaviour affects learning, places additional pressure on teachers and can have an impact on the wellbeing of both staff and pupils."

The Department is seeking input from both teachers and post-primary pupils through surveys, alongside a wider Call for Evidence which is seeking input from school leaders, parents, academics and education organisations. The exercises will provide a comprehensive picture of behaviour, disruption and safety in schools.

Paul Givan continued: "I want to hear directly from those who experience behaviour issues in the classroom, whether that is teachers, pupils, parents or school leaders. I want to know what works well and what issues exist."

"The information gathered

will help us identify what is working well, where support is needed and what practical steps can be taken to strengthen behaviour standards."

Responses will inform the current review and help shape a new behaviour policy, ensuring that future guidance is informed by evidence and

the experiences of those working and learning in schools.

The Call for Evidence closes on 6 October 2026.

Further information on how to participate is available: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/call-evidence-review-behaviour-policy-and-practice-schools>

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Upper Sixth	4:00pm - 5:00pm

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Good nursery and pre-primary care shapes far more than early ABCs. It builds confidence, language and the social skills children carry into school.

Research shows high quality early childhood education and care can have positive and long lasting impacts on outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged children. Benefits grow when care is warm and responsive and when staff are well trained and stable.

The Study of Early Education and Development followed 3,930 children and families. Children who attended more hours per week between ages two and four had significant cognitive and socio-emotional advantages. Those benefits were felt regardless of family disadvantage.

Quality matters most. Children in high quality formal group settings

such as nursery and playgroup showed increased non-verbal cognitive development and fewer behavioural problems by age four. They showed better self-regulation and fewer peer problems. Children who spent more time with childminders were also found to have fewer emotional difficulties such as fears and worries.

There is a link to later learning too. Studies of early years provision found children who attended early education were almost eight months ahead in literacy and numeracy compared to those who did not. That early advantage helps future achievement in primary and secondary school.



Social and emotional growth is central. Early interventions were found to have lasting benefits in preventing mental health issues and fostering positive relationships. Emotional competence at three to four years contributes to social competence in kindergarten and beyond.

Good settings work closely with families.

Relationships play a huge role and home learning still matters. The best nurseries share routines, listen to parents and support independence, curiosity and wellbeing every day.

Choose a place where staff know your child by name and where play has purpose. That foundation makes school feel less daunting and far more exciting.

OPEN DAY INVITATION

Join Us for Our School's Open Day!



FORGE INTEGRATED PRIMARY AND PRE SCHOOL

We're thrilled to extend an invitation to you and your family to join us for our upcoming Open Day. It's a unique opportunity to experience the vibrant spirit and rich learning environment of Forge Integrated Primary and Pre School first-hand.



Teddy Bear's Picnic
Friday 4th
December at 2pm



Prospective Pre School and Primary 1 children and parents are welcome to join us for a relaxed playday and chat. Bring your best teddy!



Open Morning
Saturday 9th
January 10am-12pm



This is a chance to see the whole school in action.
Principal's Address: 10.15am and 11.30am



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Bethlehem Nursery School



OPEN DAY

TUESDAY 4TH JANUARY 2027
9.30AM - 11AM

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DISCOVER CREGAGH PRIMARY – A SCHOOL
WHERE EVERY CHILD BELONGS

Open Night – Wednesday 13 January 2027

Choosing the right school for your child is an important decision – and there is no better way to discover what makes a school special than to come through the doors and experience it for yourself.

Cregagh Primary School and Deaf Unit warmly invites prospective families to its Open Night on Wednesday 13 January 2027. A quieter session for prospective P1 families will run from 5pm–6pm, followed by the main Open Night from 6pm–7.30pm.

There will be plenty for our younger visitors to enjoy too! Children can meet and enjoy the animals at our on-site petting zoo and follow a special adventure trail around the school, while families explore our classrooms, meet our staff and discover what Cregagh could offer their child.

Serving children and families since 1939, Cregagh is a caring, friendly school where children are known, valued and encouraged to Aspire, Believe, Belong and Achieve. It is also the only primary school in Northern Ireland with a specialist Deaf Unit, with deaf and hearing children learning, playing and growing together as part of one inclusive school family.

Our children enjoy excellent facilities for 21st-century learning, including extensive digital technology, a 4G sports pitch, beautiful gardens, sensory provision and generous outdoor learning spaces. A Breakfast Club from 8am and a wide range of after-school clubs also provide valuable support for busy families.

In its May 2025 inspection, ETI highlighted the high expectations for behaviour and engagement, the strong culture of care and supportive relationships, and the “carefully planned and highly effective integration” between the Deaf Unit and mainstream classes.

A SPECIAL MORNING FOR OUR FUTURE P1 CHILDREN

Prospective P1 children starting school in September 2027, along with their parents and carers, are also warmly invited to a special Belfast PlayBus event at Cregagh Primary School on Saturday 16 January 2027.

It will be a fun and relaxed opportunity for children to enjoy the PlayBus while families can visit the school, meet our staff and get another feel for life at Cregagh.

Places for the PlayBus event must be booked online in advance. Booking will open at the beginning of January 2027, so keep an eye on the Cregagh Primary School Facebook page in the New Year for full details and the booking link.

Come and discover Cregagh for yourself – we would love to welcome you.

OPEN NIGHT:
Wednesday 13 January 2027 | 5pm–6pm & 6pm–7.30pm

Petting Zoo • Children’s Adventure Trail • Meet the Staff • Explore the School

P1 PLAYBUS EVENT:
Saturday 16 January 2027 | Advance booking required cregaghprimary.org.uk | 028 9040 1246

Braniel Primary School & Nursery Unit
Builds Belonging through Nature and Nurture

Braniel Primary and Nursery School in east Belfast is building success under the Principalship of Mr Niall Manogue. Mr Manogue guides a caring and stimulating community where children are prepared for life as well as learning.

The School’s mission aims to establish an environment where each child is respected and valued. Children learn mutual self-respect and gain a strong sense of belonging. They are equipped for today and empowered for tomorrow!

This ethos is built on clear values of ‘belonging, respecting and aspiring’. The School creates a happy and positive climate where all children feel encouraged. Learning is effective and inclusive and self-esteem is nurtured. Needs are paramount and children are supported physically, emotionally, spiritually, intellectually and socially.

A key strength is the Nursery Unit attached to the main School. It offers full-time and part-time places and ensures a smooth transition into Primary One.

Innovative outdoor learning sets Braniel Primary School & Nursery Unit apart. The campus includes a sloped woodland transformed into adventurous play. A custom agility trail leads to a robust Jungle Dome climbing structure. The space encourages physical challenge and mental engagement while blending with nature.

The curriculum is broad balanced and relevant. It focuses on holistic development and key life skills. Literacy and numeracy remain central alongside citizenship and community.

Earlier this year Belfast City Airport’s Community Fund supported a new garden project. The initiative transforms an unused area into a vibrant learning space where children will garden together and build confidence as well as sustainability skills.

Families can learn more about Braniel Primary School and Nursery Unit at the forthcoming Open Days on Wednesday 2nd and Saturday 5th December.

For more information visit www.braniepls.co.uk and discover the Braniel difference!



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Braniel Primary & Nursery School

Open Day

Wednesday 2nd December

10.00am – 11.00am & 5.30pm – 6.30pm

Saturday 5th December

10.00am – 11.00am

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Belvoir Theatre to Host Panto Spectacular this Christmas!

Christmas brings a much loved tradition with Cinderella: The Pantomime. The show runs from 16 December 2026 until 3 January 2027 at Belvoir Studio Theatre, with a choice of matinee and evening performances throughout the festive period.

Written by Alan P. Frayn each performance offers a world of magic and family fun with this timeless tale with of course the glamour of a royal ball, a sprinkle of magic and plenty of dreams coming true. Bringing together a stellar cast and crew of talented amateurs and professionals the audience will be treated to sterling performances with fantastic live music, stunning sets and dazzling



Action from last year's pantomime 'Sleeping Beauty' costumes. Belvoir has produced traditional family years! Located in the pantomimes for over fifty Belvoir estate, the venue

seats up to 200 people and this years Panto is a must see for all the family. Over 200 shows have been staged in more than five decades. Productions range from classic comedies and West End musicals to searing dramas. For more details of this and other performances scheduled for Winter 2026 Tickets and information are available at www.belvoirplayers.org. Did you know? Last years Panto SOLD OUT For the entire run of 21 performances so it's wise to book early or you may miss out!

Belvoir Park: Six Decades of Heart in South Belfast

Belvoir Park Primary School has been a cornerstone of South Belfast since 1965.

Situated in the heart of Belvoir Estate the school enjoys an excellent building and open grass areas with mature trees. It benefits from close links to the EA Youth Centre and to Belvoir Players, Belvoir Activity Centre and Belvoir Forest Park.

The name Belvoir means beautiful view in French and is pronounced today as beaver. The school opened as part of the new estate and has grown into a thriving inclusive community.

Today the school provides seven mainstream classes from P1 to P7 as a single stream entry. The Nursery unit offers 52 full-time places across two classes and has recently been refurbished.

A key part of its identity is specialist provision. Belvoir Park was one of the first mainstream schools to open specialist classes in 1999. It now offers six Specialist Provision classes, three for Speech and Language and three for Social Communication catering for pupils from P1 to P7.



The school prides itself on an inclusive environment where every child has the right to an education that meets their individual needs. Its accommodation includes 16 classrooms plus a playroom, computer suite, library and music room, sensory room and calm room, assembly and dining halls and a speech therapy suite. Core values are displayed with pride on its open day material. They are Trustworthy, Respectful, Understanding, Nurturing and Knowledgeable. That ethos is recognised beyond the estate. The school holds the Eco-Schools Green Flag and the Woodland Trust Green Tree Schools Bronze Award for its work in outdoor learning and conservation. It is also a NIFSA Official Forest School and was joint winner of Best Primary School in Belfast at the Families First Awards in 2023. At its heart the aim remains simple. To develop confidence and natural curiosity and to help each pupil be the best wonderful and unique person they can be. Belvoir Park Primary School can be found at Belvoir Drive Belfast BT8 7DL. More information is on www.belvoirparkps.co.uk



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ADDING TEXTURE TO YOUR HOME

It is all too easy for certain rooms in your home to become flat and uninspired – this is exactly where adding texture can help.

For a reason unknown to many, texture seems to be an afterthought when it comes to interior design. However it is this very element that will make a room pop, giving it that extra edge of aesthetic pleasure. Texture is often primarily associated with the sensation of touch; however it can also really impact on how we view a room. In many ways, it is the perceived sense of touch that we derive pleasure from – if a velvet sofa looks particularly smooth or a blanket seems notably soft then even if we do not experience it first hand, we can appreciate it.

Modern interior design demands a variety of contrasting textures for space to feel complete and these can range in colour, function and style. If everything in a room is the same texture, then our eyes have trouble distinguishing between one thing and the next. If we have a variety of textures then this adds visual weight to any space. It is important to be restrained. Stick to two or three textures per space.

In terms of furniture, bringing wooden elements such as coffee tables or benches into your home will add that variety of texture. Similarly, if you are redesigning a space entirely, it can be beneficial to use new textures such as marble or granite tabletops and even exposed brick work.

If it is a quick texture fix that you are looking for, adding

satin cushion covers or wicker storage boxes could be exactly what you need.



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The Statement Sofa

With neutral colours becoming the norm in homes across the country, it is important to have a statement piece.

This burst of colour can offset the greys and whites that dominate most home design and bring a sense of energy to the home.

Statement walls and rugs have been done before, now is time for the statement sofa. Whilst once the sofa design was dictated by practical considerations on account of their price and vulnerability to damage – but the progress made in sustainable materials means that the variety of sofa available is wider than ever.

Velvet sofas in bold colours such as burnt orange or yellow in high demand at the moment and patterned sofas that have been largely

on the periphery of interior design since the Eighties are making a strong resurgence. Bespoke sofas can be made to your own specifications and taste at very affordable prices – offering everything from geometric design to animal prints. The time has come to get the statement sofa of your dreams and add that splash of creativity to your home.



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USING COLOUR TO CREATE FENG SHUI IN YOUR HOME

Feng Shui can be exactly what you need to create an environment that will aid you in achieving your goals.

If this is the year for self growth and renewal, then Feng Shui decoration should be at the top of your to do list. Unlike traditional interior design, this style is aimed solely at creating a vibrant feeling of joy and harmony that will bolster your energy, enthusiasm and drive to achieve your design goals.

Similar to other design trends, each space must be designed in a unique way for its individual purpose.

Designing a home office using Feng Shui will mean dispelling traditional ideas that focus purely on functionality and focusing on creating a space that exudes positive, vibrant

energy. Achieving these desired energies can be done by following basic feng shui principles, starting by clearing out old energy before beginning to redesign. In a practical sense, this means decluttering.

Decorating a cluttered home makes little sense from a feng shui perspective and the process of decluttering has been shown to have clear cathartic properties. It is therefore imperative that you have a blank canvas to work from when beginning to create positive energy through interior design.

Air and light are both essential elements for

creating positive energy (or Chi) in your home.

Once your home is clutter-free your air quality will greatly increase and your feng shui decorating can begin.

It is important not to underestimate the power of colour to change the energy of a room and the mood of all those who enter.

Have a balanced pallet throughout your home is vital and using the Bagua map, you can decide what kind of energy you would like to promote in each room. Feng Shui has relatively strict symbolisation for colour, with red/purple-



violet inviting abundance, passion or royalty, green promoting restorative energy, black evoking wisdom and whites symbolising purity or precision.

Fundamentally, each room must serve a purpose and through colour, you can promote the creation to positive energies that will aid you in achieving your goals.

Thinking of building a Garden Room? Here is what you need to know

Garden rooms have been a revelation in the property world. Making your outdoor area into valuable living space can both greatly improve your quality of life as well as increasing the value of your property.

Garden rooms can range in shapes, sizes and designs – each one made specifically for the garden in which it is situated. These rooms give you the ideal place to take in the beauty of the seasons from the comfort and warmth of your home.

The most obvious benefit of building a garden room is the additional living space that it will provide. As populations continue to expand and urban living becomes ever more popular, finding enough space in the home is a problem that many

people face. In the past, extensions have been the obvious solution, however in recent times garden rooms are overtaking them as the go to renovation trend.

One benefit of a garden room is that it is separated from the house. This physical separation provides a sense of distance from the worries, stresses and concerns of the home; creating the ideal retreat to relax and unwind.

Garden rooms are also considerably more simple and cheap to construct. Unlike extensions, most garden rooms do

not require planning permission unless you're deciding on an annexe that is designed for living in. Their construction can take a little as a week and their costs remain minute in comparison to an extension.

Versatility is a huge benefit of garden rooms. If you value your own design flare and wish to put your own stamp on this space – then garden rooms are for you. The design options are seemingly endless and with each room build to fit the garden, there is plenty of space to leave your mark on this build.

Getting On the Property Ladder – Advice for First Time Buyers

As a first-time-buyer, the prospect of getting on the property ladder can seem daunting and complicated. However, by following our advice, the steps can become significantly easier.

The first thing that you will have to do is begin saving for a deposit. Generally, you will have to save between 5% and 20% of the value of the property that you like – if the home is £150,000 then you will need between £7,500 (5%) and £30,00 (20%) depending on the property. It is important to note that saving more for your deposit will give access to a wider range of cheaper mortgages – so get saving!

It is important that you factor in the other costs associated with buying a property. These can add up to the thousands of

pounds and can derail any potential budget when it comes to getting your first home. Additional costs include survey costs, solicitor's fees, buildings insurance and valuation fees to name but a few. It is worth asking your bank about these prices before making an offer and you can therefore factor them into your budget. First-time-buyers do have an advantage here as they will pay no Stamp Duty on the first £300,000 for properties valued up to £500,000.

When applying for your mortgage, the most

important factor for your lender is to know that you will be able to meet your repayments. You will need to provide documentation of all of your outgoing costs, including, debts, household bills, or other costs such as car repayments, childcare or travel costs. The amount that a lender will give you for a mortgage is directly related to both your income and outgoing expenses – so it is important to consider this when looking into homes that you can afford.

There are a number of governmental schemes



available to help first-time-buyers get on the property market such as affordable housing schemes, help to buy schemes and shared ownership schemes. These

are designed to assist those who are struggling to save their full deposit and might be exactly what is required to get you on the property ladder.

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Harry Enfield coming to Waterfront Hall

Harry Enfield is set to appear at The Waterfront Hall, Belfast on 30-Nov-26 In the final date of his national wide tour with his show Harry Enfield and No Chums, offering an intimate and retrospective journey into the mind and career of the renowned comedian.

This show is part autobiographical exploration and part character comedy, offering a behind-the-scenes look at character development, the art of performance, and reflections on British culture over four decades. Through a mix of storytelling and classic sketches, Enfield brings to life iconic characters such as Loadsamoney, Stavros, Mr. Don't, and the working-class Wayne and Waynetta Slob, revealing the real-life inspirations and personal anecdotes that shaped their creation. He also revisits memorable duos like Smashie and

Nicey and the Surgeons, and discusses how these characters were conceived, how they evolved, and the cultural impact they had, often sparking public reaction. The narrative is peppered with sharp social commentary, touching on themes from changing political landscapes to the complexities of modern social issues, all seen through the unique and deliciously silly lens of Harry Enfield's creations. Experience the man, the characters, and the stories that made Harry Enfield a comedy icon. Harry Enfield is a BAFTA-winning comedian, actor, writer



and director. Since beginning his career on Channel 4's Saturday Live, Harry has been involved in some of the most iconic and successful comedy shows of the last three decades. Some of his famous characters include Wayne and Waynetta Slob, Mr Cholmondley-Warner,

and Kevin the Teenager. Harry's awards include the 1998 British Comedy Award for top BBC1 Comedy Personality and Silver Roses of Montreux in 1990 (for Norbert Smith). In 2009, Harry received a BAFTA alongside Paul Whitehouse for their BBC1 series Harry & Paul. In 2023, Harry and Paul Whitehouse reunite for a special one-hour sketch show to mark the BBC's centenary. For tickets visit https://www.fane.co.uk/harry-enfield

£16M INVESTMENT SET TO STRENGTHEN NIFRS EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Health Minister Robbie Butler has welcomed a major investment in Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service (NIFRS), including £11million for 31 new fire appliances, which will be deployed to fire stations across Northern Ireland.

A total of 47 new specialist vehicles and appliances will be rolled out to fire stations across Northern Ireland. The investment, which totals over £16million, represents a significant operational fleet upgrade to enhance emergency response and support firefighters in protecting local communities.

During his first visit to NIFRS Service Support Centre in Belfast, Minister Butler met with Aidan Jennings, Chief Fire and Rescue Officer and Paula White, Director of Finance and Support Services, to hear more about the integration of the new appliances, the impact of this investment and future plans for the service. The Minister viewed the vehicles, which are equipped with upgraded technology designed to improve firefighter safety, enhance operational effectiveness, support crew welfare and strengthen clean cab



L-R Health Minister Robbie Butler joins Aidan Jennings, Chief Fire and Rescue Officer and Paula White, Director of Finance and Support Services to welcome a £16m investment in new NIFRS appliances and equipment.

and contaminant management arrangements. Minister Butler said the fleet upgrade will provide improved protection and comfort for fire crews attending incidents across Northern Ireland. "This major investment ensures fire crews have access to reliable, modern vehicles, equipping them to respond quickly and effectively when communities need them most. These modern appliances will help fire crews meet the demands of the increasingly complex challenges they face every day and have been designed with safety, resilience and efficiency at their

core, providing crews with the tools they need to protect people, property and the environment. "Importantly, the vehicles also incorporate measures to support firefighter health and wellbeing, including enhanced arrangements for managing operational contaminants and reducing exposure to harmful substances. This investment demonstrates our commitment not only to maintaining an effective emergency response service, but also to protecting the wellbeing of the firefighters who serve our communities." NIFRS Chief Fire & Rescue Officer, Aidan Jennings said: "We thank Minister Butler for supporting this significant investment in the operational resilience of our service. The new Fire Appliances and

specialist vehicles strengthen our emergency response, reduce maintenance pressures and ensure our firefighters are equipped with leading-edge resources to meet the challenges and demands on our service, when responding to incidents. This investment is also about our people and our ability to ensure that they have the right resources to continue to deliver a professional and effective emergency response to communities across Northern Ireland." The investment includes funding for three new Command Support Units, which will be introduced into frontline service next year. These specialist units play a vital role in coordinating responses to major incidents and help maintain a safe, efficient and dependable emergency response capability.

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Build it gradually and add one item at a time when you do your weekly shop. Start with light and information. Put together an emergency kit in a backpack containing battery operated torches with one for each member of the family. Include spare batteries and a battery powered radio and a phone power bank. Choose bulbs that have lithium

batteries that charge on your electricity supply and will remain illuminated for several hours in the event of a power cut. Keep candles and matches as backup but never leave them burning alone.

Next sort food and warmth. What should be in a household emergency kit includes long-life food and water and a torch and batteries and a wind-up or battery radio. Add warm layers and blankets and copies of key documents and essential medication. A flask of hot water helps and a camping stove can make tea safely. Keep some cash handy as card terminals and ATMs and online banking can fail in a power cut.

Plan what to do when lights go out. Here is a handy checklist you can refer to so you know what to do when there is no electricity. Locate your torch and power cut survival kit if you have one and check it is a power cut and not a tripped fuse. Report the power cut to your network distributor. Store the number now in your mobile phone with the name Power cut. Include a list of emergency contact numbers as a paper copy incase your phone loses power. Include essential medication and a first aid kit and backup power for medical equipment if needed. Also essential medication and a first aid kit.

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Waking Up To Wet Windows?

If you wake to dripping windows every winter morning you are not alone. Condensation forms when warm moist air touches a cold surface like window glass.

In winter this is worse because glass stays much colder while heating and daily life create more moisture inside.

The problem is simple physics. Cooking and showering and drying clothes indoors all add vapour to the air. When that moisture has nowhere to go it settles on the coldest surface in the home which is often your windows. That is why condensation appears in the morning and why only interior glass is wet. Condensation issues always increase during winter when external temperatures are low and

internal temperatures tend to be high.

Left alone it causes more than a wet sill. Lots of condensation can lead to dampness which can cause mould growth on blinds and walls and ceilings. When a surface has condensation on it this can provide ideal conditions for growth of mould spores.

You can reduce it without major work. Open windows each day to ensure good airflow and try to do this in the morning. If your home is not well ventilated that moisture settles on cold surfaces and eventually causes mould and damp. Use extractor



fans when cooking or bathing and dry clothes outside whenever you can. Wipe condensation off windows and surfaces each morning to stop moisture sitting.

Heat also helps. It is important to keep rooms heated to prevent

condensation as this keeps water vapour from cooling too much. Keep heating on low and steady and keep trickle vents open. Doing this while keeping windows or vents open will help excess moisture escape

LOOK UP BEFORE THE STORM HITS

You do not need ladders to spot winter roof trouble. You can get an idea of your roof's condition with both feet on the ground by looking for obvious damage. A quick check now prevents leaks and costly repairs later.

Start with binoculars from the front and back garden. Scan from the ground with binoculars and check for cracked and slipped or missing tiles and slates.

Often this can safely be undertaken from the ground using binoculars and you should look for any loose or missing tiles and cracks or signs of wear. Pay attention to ridges and valleys and around chimneys. A slipped slate or cracked

ridge tile may not be obvious but one storm can worsen it.

Next look at gutters and downpipes. Blocked gutters and downpipes are a common cause of storm damage during the wettest months. Make sure your gutters are free from excess debris when you know a storm is coming to make sure any water drains correctly. You should also check from the ground for signs that

your gutters are sagging and have them repaired or replaced. Look for debris on the ground that may have come from the roof as this signals loose material.

Do not forget inside. Once it is safe visually inspect from the ground and look for damage to guttering and torn or missing roof tiles and debris. Take a look inside and see if there are any signs of water damage or leaks.

Check the loft if you have one as this will likely be one of the first areas to show signs of damage. Preparing your roof is not only about aesthetics but about ensuring its durability to withstand the weight of torrential rain and snow and ice.

If you spot anything book a roofer early. You do not need to climb up ladders to keep an eye on your roof and simple checks can be done safely from ground level.

Boiler Dead? Check This First

A cold house in winter is miserable and a boiler breakdown always feels urgent. Before calling out a gas engineer for a boiler breakdown carry out a few simple checks beforehand.

These quick checks can save a callout fee and get heat back faster.

Start with the basics that often get missed. Follow this checklist to diagnose the problem with your broken boiler. Check the electricity supply and check the gas or oil supply and check the water supply. Look at the fuse box and the boiler switch and make sure the gas meter has credit. Low pressure is a common cause so check the boiler pressure and top up if the gauge is below one bar.

Next check the controls. Check the thermostat and programmer and make sure timers have not reset after a power cut. Many modern units have a fault code display so check for boiler fault codes and note them for the



engineer. Does the boiler have a reset button and if the boiler has a permanent pilot light has it been extinguished. Press reset once and wait to see if it relights.

In freezing weather check for frozen pipes as this stops the boiler firing. The condensate pipe outside often

freezes and you can thaw it with warm water. Listen for gurgling and look for dripping. Clear the blockage and reset the boiler again.

If nothing works call a professional. Have your boiler inspected and serviced by a Gas Safe registered

engineer ideally before the cold weather kicks in. An annual service is part of healthy boiler maintenance and will help reduce the risk of a breakdown when you need it the most. Regular checks clean main components and ensure the boiler is ready for use.

NI Water encourages simple water-saving habits all year round

NI Water is encouraging households across Northern Ireland to think about the everyday value of water and where small savings can be made, after the latest Household Water Usage survey highlighted just how much we rely on water for daily life at home and outdoors.

The Department for Infrastructure's Household Water Usage in Northern Ireland 2025/26 survey shows how important water is to household routines, from showering and laundry to washing dishes and outdoor jobs. Almost half of respondents shower seven times a week, around nine in ten shower three or more times weekly, and most households use a washing machine more than once a week.

NI Water says the figures provide a timely opportunity to encourage people to value water as an essential resource and to make small,

realistic changes where they can to help save water.

Water is also part of many outdoor tasks, with 84% of households saying they have a hosepipe or bucket for outside jobs. The figure was highest in Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon at 89%, followed by Mid Ulster at 88%, while Causeway Coast and Glens, Newry, Mourne and Down, and North Down and Ards each recorded 86%.

The findings come after a very dry summer. Northern Ireland received just 30% of its average rainfall in July 2026, its eighth driest

July on record, highlighting how quickly warm, dry weather can put extra pressure on water supplies and the network.

Key survey findings:

- Showers: 48% of respondents shower seven times a week and 89% shower three or more times weekly. Some 43% take showers lasting five minutes or less, while 45% take six to ten minutes.

- Bathing: 65% never use, or do not own, a bath; only 8% use one more than once a week.

- Washing machines: 85% of households use one more than once a week and 25%

use one every day.

- Dishwashers: 18% of households use one daily, while 43% do not own one.

- Toilets: 72% of households have a dual flush toilet.

- Outdoor use: 84% of households have a hosepipe or bucket for outside use.

Households can get personalised water-saving advice and free water-saving items, including shower timers, tooth-brushing timers, loo strips, water butts and insulated outdoor tap covers, by completing NI Water's free online water audit at www.getwaterfit.co.uk.

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