Agenda

Agenda

Attachment: PP 2026.11.05 Agenda.pdf ***Page 1***

1. Apologies

2. Declarations of Interest

Presentation

3. Presentation by Chief Executive of Tourism NI (as requested by Council)

Attachment: 3. AND_TourismNI_Nov P&P.pdf ***Page 3***

Reports for Approval

4. Destination Events Investment Scheme

Report attached

Attachment: 4. Destination Events Investment Scheme.pdf ***Page 15***

Attachment: 4.1 DEIS Bid For Fund 2021-26.pdf ***Page 21***

Reports for Noting

5. Arts and Heritage Annual Reports 2025/26 and Update on IAHS Review

Report attached

Attachment: 5. Arts and Heritage Annual Reports 2526 and Update on IAHS Review.pdf ***Page 22***

Attachment: 5.1 Arts Annual Report 2025-26.pdf ***Page 24***

Attachment: 5.1a Arts Report Summary Detail 2025-26.pdf ***Page 39***

Attachment: 5.2 Heritage and Museum Annual Report 2025-26.pdf ***Page 65***

Attachment: 5.2a Heritage and Museum Summary Detail 2025.26.pdf ***Page 85***

6. Visit Belfast Overview Report 2025/26

Report attached

Attachment: 6. Visit Belfast Overview 2025.26.pdf ***Page 96***

Attachment: 6.1 Visual Examples of Visit Belfast 2025.26 SLA Activity.pdf ***Page 99***

7. Notices of Motion (if any)

8. Any Other Notified Business

IN CONFIDENCE

Reports for Approval (In Confidence)

9. Local Economic Partnership Update

Report attached

Attachment: 9. Local Economic Partnership -Update November 2026.pdf ***Not included***

Attachment: 9.1 Minutes of the LEP meeting of 22 September 2026.pdf ***Not included***

Reports for Noting (In Confidence)

10. Update on Service Delivery - Verbal

ARDS AND NORTH DOWN BOROUGH COUNCIL

28 October 2026

Dear Sir/Madam

You are hereby invited to attend a hybrid meeting (in person and via Zoom) of the Place and Prosperity Committee of the Ards and North Down Borough Council which will be held in the Council Chamber, 2 Church Street, Newtownards, on **Thursday 5 November 2026** commencing at **7.00pm.**

Yours faithfully

Susie McCullough
Chief Executive
Ards and North Down Borough Council

A G E N D A

1. Apologies

2. Declarations of Interest

Presentation

3. Presentation by Chief Executive of Tourism NI (as requested by Council)

Reports for Approval

4. Destination Events Investment Scheme (report attached)

Reports for Noting

5. Arts and Heritage Annual Reports 2025/26 and Update on IAHS Review (report attached)

6. Visit Belfast Overview 2025/26 (report attached)

7. Notices of Motion (if any)

8. Any Other Notified Business

*****IN CONFIDENCE*****

Reports for Approval (In Confidence)

9. Local Economic Partnership Update (report attached)

Reports for Noting (In Confidence)

10. Update on Service Delivery (verbal)

MEMBERSHIP OF PLACE AND PROSPERITY COMMITTEE (16 MEMBERS)

Alderman Adair	Councillor Hollywood
Alderman Armstrong-Cotter	Councillor Kennedy
Alderman McDowell	Councillor McCollum
Councillor Blaney	Councillor McCracken
Councillor Brady (Vice Chair)	Councillor Morgan
Councillor Edmund	Councillor Newman
Councillor Gilmour	Councillor Smart (Chair)
Councillor Hennessy	Councillor Thompson



Ards & North Down Council

Place & Prosperity Committee

"Growing the Destination Through Partnership"

Laura McCorry
CEO Tourism Northern Ireland

5 November 2026

TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND

Back to Agenda



Tourism is amidst of the most rapid transformation in decades.

Expectations, behaviours, technologies, market dynamics and competitive landscapes are shifting at pace.

TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND

Back to Agenda



Councils are creating the conditions in which tourism can succeed.

£1.5 Billion

TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND









Momentum is Visible :Shaping A Destination in Ards and North Down

Good Visitor Promise

Putting people, place and nature at the heart of tourism

Connected Outdoors

Greenways, coastal access and active travel

Experience Led Growth

''Going Beyond'' Creating memorable visitor experiences

Confident Storytelling

Absolutely Ards & North Down

TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND

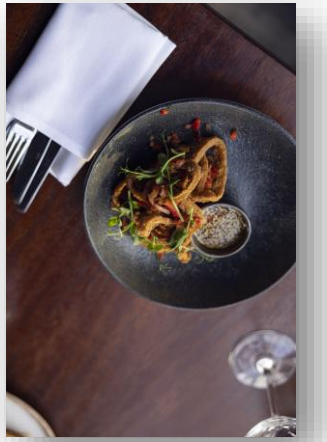
Back to Agenda

A DISTINCTIVE PROPOSITION

Heritage | Coast & Outdoors| Food & Culture | Maritime Character









Tourism NI is working beside you







COUNCIL

Place-shaping, infrastructure, stewardship and destination ambition

BUSINESSES

Authentic experiences, hospitality, stories and commercial delivery

TOURISM NI

Insight, development support, business engagement demand generation and market reach

TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND

Bringing demand to the doorsteps of businesses

1 DEVELOP

Build distinctive, bookable experiences

2 CONNECT

Link businesses, stories and places

3 PROMOTE

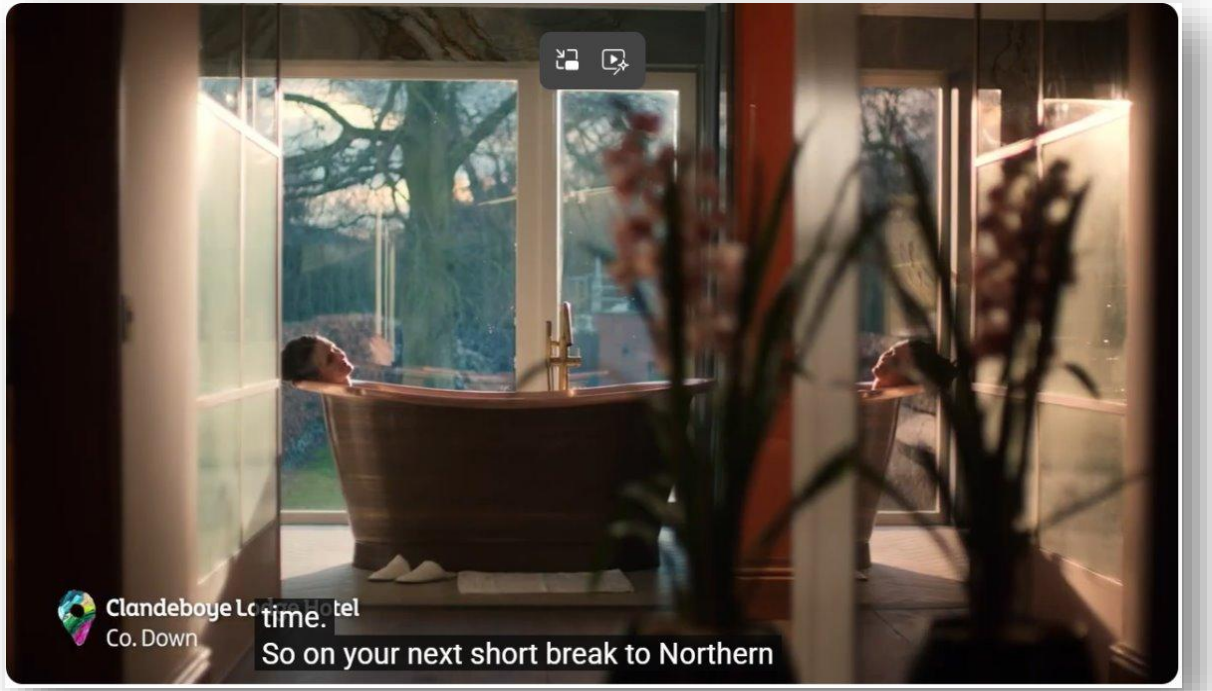
Create reach through campaigns, PR and content

4 CONVERT

Turn attention into visits and local value

Back to Agenda

Demand Generation Television | Digital | Press | Social Media



56.5m estimated advertising impacts

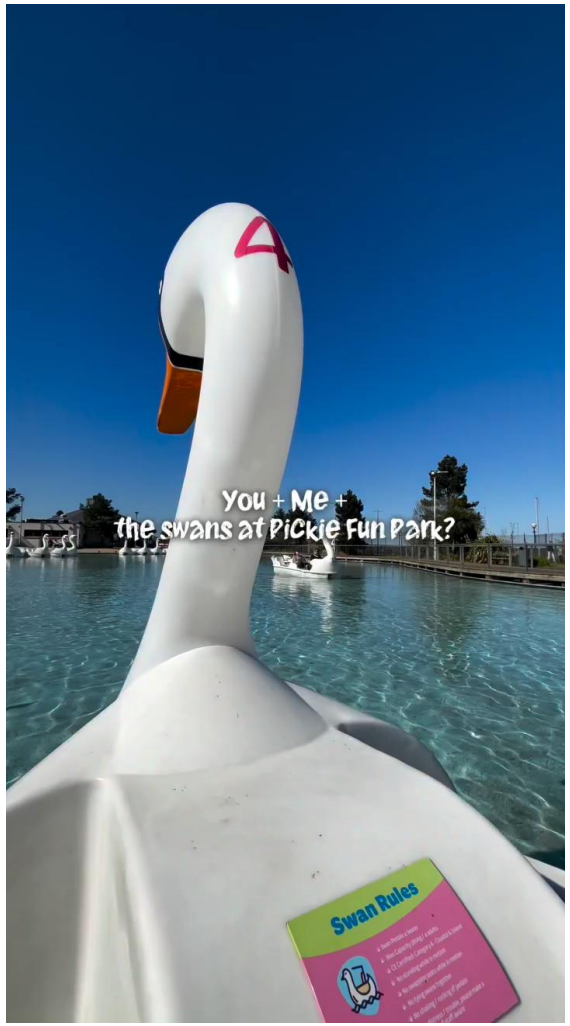
60m+ digital impressions

69% estimated adult reach across the island of Ireland

Ards and North Down is prominent within Tourism NI's autumn activity, supported by influencer, PR, trade and media engagement.

Demand Generation ~ Telling authentic local stories and Converting visibility into future growth







Füde for thought

SOPHIE CLARKE on the Co Down deli championing home produce

A CO Down deli is championing independent food producers by exclusively stocking products made on the island of Ireland.

Indie Füde, which has shops in Comber and on Belfast's Ormeau Road, brings together more than 700 products, from artisan cheeses to locally made preserves.

The idea began in 2014, when co-owner Johnny McDowell's passion for cooking and local food took him around Ireland, visiting small producers and farmers' markets.

He wanted to bring the food he discovered together under one roof, making it easier for customers to find.

"Johnny came up with the name and everyone always asks us how to pronounce 'Füde'," explains co-owner Laura Bradley.

"It's literally just food, but he liked spelling it that way because the 'ü' looks like a smiley face and we're always happy talking about and supporting local businesses."

The producers are all based on the island of Ireland and see loads of unique home-grown Irish produce on the shelves," Laura says.

"You might see bits and pieces at markets or on holiday, but then you wouldn't be able to find them when you came home.

"So we wanted to provide a way of making all that stuff accessible to people and showcase all these amazing local makers we have."

Indie Füde began as a website before expanding to a stall at Comber Market and eventually a bricks and mortar shop, where Johnny could talk to customers about the products and build relationships with their producers.

Laura joined the business in 2017, initially as an employee before becoming a co-owner.

"He slid into my DMs on Twitter," she laughs.

At the time, she was working for wine merchant James Nicholson and writing a food blog featuring local producers.

"I was writing a lot of articles about different local producers because that's what I was really into.

Indie Füde owners Johnny McDowell and Laura Bradley

spread the word on socials.

"So I went along, met Johnny and then about eight months down the line I started working for him. And then we sort of gradually became

> Johnny can always aski literally jus because th always hap businesses

of searching, Laura says that the north's artisan food scene has grown significantly in recent years.

"Because we've been around for so long now, we're

cattle, we have the most incredible milk, so we do make exceptional cheese," Laura enthuses.

Staff undertake cheese training, helping them guide

$30,000 for charity in the last few years," Laura explains.

"It's something we're incredibly passionate about. Giving something back is a massive part of what we're about."

Looking ahead, Laura and Johnny have bought a build-

Keeping soda bread tradition alive from her own kitchen

SOPHIE CLARKE

A CO Antrim woman has told how she is keeping the north's

Ireland are often more surprised at how quickly they can make it.

"People wouldn't necessarily know that it's as quick as anything to make," Tracey said. "By the time you've gone to the shop to buy bread, this is ready."

The eldest of five children, Tracey grew up helping her mother bake for the family at home in Co Antrim.

"We didn't have much money, so my mum was constantly making things that we could eat, because we had for a while, like custard and things like that.

"Or sometimes we'd come in from school and she'd have made all sorts of traybakes for us which were amazing.

"And I think my love for baking stemmed from there, I just loved being in the kitchen making sweet things with her."

Tracey went on to study Hospitality at college and initially worked and trained as a teacher, although she admits her desire to do something with food was always at the back of her mind.

While studying, she worked in a patisserie in France, where she learned to

> I'd been to loads of cookery classes where you sat back and watched but didn't take part i

make macaroons. When she returned home, she began making them for weddings and farmers' markets. But the precision required was a far cry from the baking she most enjoyed.

"You had to be perfect about your measurements, down to the last grammes," she said. "I did it for weddings for a while, but I found it quite stressful."

Eventually Tracey began looking for a way to share her love of local food. A friend suggested holding classes at home, so she set about seeing whether people would make the trip to Ballymorran Bay.

"My worry was that I was stuck out in this rural part of Co Down," she said.

"I thought, 'Will coaches come down here? Will people find this, or will they just give up?'

"But it's worked. Now tour operators bring people here as part of their itineraries. By the time they get down

Tracey Jeffery has welcomed visitors to her farmhouse kitchen on the shores of Strangford Lough for the past 10 years

Back to Agenda



B2B Sales



TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND

Support For Business



Build



Boost



Breakthrough

- Digital capability
- Productivity
- Sustainability
- Skills
- Commercial development

Back to Agenda

THANK YOU



ITEM 4

Ards and North Down Borough Council

Report Classification	Unclassified
Exemption Reason	Not Applicable
	If multiple:
Meeting	Place and Prosperity Committee
Date of Meeting	05 November 2026
Responsible Director	Director of Place and Prosperity
Responsible Head of Service	Head of Tourism, Arts and Heritage
Report title	Destination Events Investment Scheme
Attachments	Appendix 1 - DEIS Bid For Fund 2021-26
File Reference (if applicable)	TO/EG71
Legislation	Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014
Resource Implications	Budget and Staffing Narrative: Budget request for next 3 years is included within the Report and is subject to the normal Rates Setting process
Screening Requirements	*The Council will commit to consider the implication of all reports under the categories of Section 75, Rural Needs, Data Protection, Climate and Sustainability:* Screening will be required if agreed
Link to Corporate Plan Priority and Outcome	Priority 1: Economic 4. A vibrant, attractive, sustainable Borough for citizens, visitors, businesses and investors If multiple:

Background

The Integrated Tourism Development and Regeneration Strategy (ITDRS) sets out ambitious targets for Tourism, including increasing share of overnight trips from 6% in 2016 to 10% in 2030 and associated visitor expenditure to increase from £46m in 2016 to £82m in 2030. Additionally, The Big Plan provides an overarching framework to achieve Outcome 4: All people in Ards and North Down benefit from a prosperous economy. Specifically attracting tourists to the area.

In November 2020, the Council approved the Borough Events Strategic Direction (BESD) 2021-2026 which was extended to 2028, a priority set out in the ITRDS. The BESD outlines a vision for a more sustainable, successful, and impactful portfolio of events that deliver a range of cultural, social and economic outcomes for the Borough. This includes development of an Event Bid for Model within the Strategy lifespan.

To date, four events fitting into the 'Bid For' category have made approaches to the Council, sought approval for support, and have been delivered with assistance from the Bid for Fund. See Appendix 1.

Support to date, has included financial assistance and officer advisory support (cross service as relevant e.g. Events, Risk Management, Tourism and Lands). A 'Host your next sporting event' website page (cross service initiative to be used/promoted to relevant groups) has also been developed Host Your Next Sporting Event in Ards and North Down. It is proposed that to develop this workstream the Council may wish to consider a Destination Events Investment Scheme (DEIS), to be promoted alongside the existing portfolio of Funds for events i.e. Tourism Events and Festivals Fund and the Growth Events Fund, underpinned with online support via the Events Toolkit.

The BESD sets out that;

'A Major bid-for event would need to attract significant partnership investment, raise the profile of the Borough on a world stage and leave a positive legacy'. These would be connected to the USP and key strengths of the Borough, particularly the 'Blue/Green' aspect'.

'In planning they bring together new partnerships and alliances... in delivery, they should bring in additional investment, attract significant numbers of out-of-town visitors or participants that spend money in the local economy and they can be engineered to provide significant supply contracts, employment and volunteer and training opportunities for local people. They should raise the profile of the hosting place.'

Key Issues

The vision for the new Scheme is that the Council would partner with event organisers to 'bid for and host' events based on the strengths and suitable infrastructure of the Borough. It is anticipated that this will be driven by event organisers, but the Council could also take the lead and approach partner/s if it identifies a suitable opportunity.

It is acknowledged suitable infrastructure is an essential requirement to deliver major bid for events. It is therefore likely that the types of events which event organisers may hope to develop/secure will be relevant to the projected stock of accommodation and venue/s available at the time of the approach. It should also be noted that although 'bids' may be made to relevant international organisations, these are not without risk i.e. failure of the bid and potential loss of investment for both the organiser and any partner e.g. Council.

Destination Events Investment Scheme (DEIS)

Aim
To work in partnership with and assist event organisers in bidding for, developing and delivering events that return measurable economic impact and contribute to the growth of Ards and North Down Borough as an event host destination.

Objectives
Events must (have the potential to):

1. **Increase the local economy**

- Attract at least 35% participants and/or attendees from Out of the Borough with at least 10% of these from out of Northern Ireland;
- Generate a minimum direct economic benefit of £200,000 for the Borough through increased bed nights and additional spend;
- Provide opportunities for employment and for creating the conditions for local businesses to grow and thrive through spending related to the event.

2. **Develop AND as an event destination**

- Grow the tourism offering within the Borough (experiences, events and visitor servicing);
- Market to audiences beyond NI as a minimum;
- Provide opportunities for volunteers to increase their capacity through roles at the events;

Eligibility Criteria
It is anticipated that Events which would be eligible to apply for support through the Destination Events Investment Scheme would need to deliver on the following:

- have the potential to raise the profile of the Borough on the international stage and generate economic return to the Borough (helping meet outcomes 1, 3 and 4 of the Corporate Plan);
- highlight the unique assets and aspects of the Borough such as our outdoor spaces, venues and stories of the Borough and strengthen our position as a tourism destination;
- must demonstrate need for the Council's financial support and have plans to generate other income;
- must be open to the general public, whether for free or paid-for;
- must be able to demonstrate previous relevant experience appropriate to the scale and type of event within the application.

Management of DEIS
It is anticipated that this would be managed via a three-stage approach:

Stage 1. Scope and bid preparation
This stage focuses on the Event Organiser presenting the event concept to the Council and collaborating with key Council Officers to explore the viability, strategic alignment, and delivery potential of hosting the event within the Borough. For peripatetic events (those that travel or move or take place in a series of different locations), this may include observational site visits to existing event locations to evaluate operational requirements, potential benefits, and the likelihood of success within the Borough. The Council may wish to provide some level of financial support, alongside officer assistance within this stage.

Stage 2. Bid application/presentation/document
This stage allows event organisers to request Council financial support towards the development of a Bid Document and any related documentation required to progress an event bidding opportunity. To be eligible to apply for this stage, organisers must have engaged with Council officers in advance of the bidding process to confirm that the proposed event has the capacity to contribute to the strategic aims and objectives of the Scheme.

Stage 3. Event Delivery
Event Organisers seeking financial assistance under Stage 3 will be required to submit a robust Business Case clearly demonstrating how the proposed event aligns with the objectives of Council Corporate Priorities, the Scheme and evidence its potential to deliver measurable outcomes for the Borough. Event Organisers will also be required to provide detailed income and expenditure, clearly identifying the projected funding shortfall. This information will form an integral part of the assessment process and will be used to inform the scoring and determination of any financial award. All applications will be independently scored by a panel of Council officers against an agreed scoring matrix, in line with the grants policy.

An organiser may apply to one or up to three phases of support. The stages chosen by the Event Organiser will determine the level of financial support, role of the Council and level of risk. It is anticipated that applications will apply across a medium to longer timeframe. For example, an applicant may make an approach to Council under the Scheme for an event to be ‘bid for’ in two years’ time but for the event not to be delivered until year four or five.

Due to the potential nature and timeframe associated with the event, it is proposed that the Council deliver this as a Grant offered to the Event Organiser across the three stages (or less, dependent upon the application and which stage the applicant applied to). The Letter of Offer would include a schedule of payments, defined roles and responsibilities of each party and the input required from Council. The scale of the event will determine whether legal support will be required (to be ringfenced as required in the Council budget) in preparation of a Letter of Offer. Reports will be brought back to Council in line with the Delegation Scheme.

Resource and Budget

Officers set a budget relevant for 'known' or 'projected' bid for events each incoming year, subject to the rates setting process. Moving forward a comprehensive budget is difficult to define until the landscape of potential event organisers/events is fully audited, however, it is anticipated that once the Scheme is actively promoted more opportunities will be identified in the medium to long term, alongside the existing pipeline of potential events held at this time.

Within the Tourism Events service the Council offers two other Event Grants

- Tourism Events and Festivals Fund - £80,000
- Growth Events Fund - £150,000 per annum (three-year fund)

To date, a budget of £30,000 per annum has been allocated for 'bid for' opportunities sought by external organisations. These three areas of financial support provide a total of £260,000 of available funds per annum, subject to the rate setting process.

In discussion with the Finance section, it is proposed that to administer the budget of the new Scheme (demand currently unknown) the totality of these budgets will be managed collectively to enhance the responsiveness of all three schemes. This will allow budgets, across the three Grants to be reallocated 'in year' or small underspends in any of the three budgets to be carried forward into following years, in line with the Scheme of Delegation.

The new Scheme will sit alongside the existing Tourism Events Grant Support service unit and will be delivered by that team. It is anticipated additional duties of the Event Officer/s will be a requirement to fully maximise the proactive approach of this project moving forward.

Next Steps

- The Council approves the direction of travel for the development of the new Destination Events Investment Scheme.
- Development of the DEIS Guidance and Application Form and be brought to the Council for approval in line with the Corporate Grants Policy.
- Budget planning as per the normal rate setting process.

Summary

Subject to Council approval of the principles and outline of the Scheme's draft aim and objectives, officers will develop and test the Guidance and Application Form prior to bringing back to the Council for approval at the appropriate juncture. Officers will continue to develop enhanced relationships with local clubs and event organisers as well as colleagues in Tourism NI, Sport NI, Arts Council NI and other stakeholders. Further reports will be brought back to the Council to update on the Scheme as relevant.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Council **Approves** the development of the Destination Events Investment Scheme, as outlined in the report, and further approves the

proposed management of the budgets allocated to up to three Tourism Event Grant Schemes, subject to the rates setting process.

Appendix 1

Bid For Fund, previously supported events 2021-2026

Year	Organiser	Event	Offered	Claimed
2021	Clandeboye Golf Club	Euro Pro Golf Tournament	£39,430	£39,430
2022	Clandeboye Golf Club	Euro Pro Golf Tournament (year two)	£34,900	£28,689
2024	Ballyholme Yacht Club	ILCA 6 Youth European Championships and Open European Trophy	£25,000	£25,000
2026	Royal North of Ireland Yacht Club	GP14 World Championships	£30,000	still to be claimed

ITEM 5

Ards and North Down Borough Council

Report Classification	Unclassified
Exemption Reason	Not Applicable
	If multiple:
Meeting	Place and Prosperity Committee
Date of Meeting	05 November 2026
Responsible Director	Director of Place and Prosperity
Responsible Head of Service	Head of Tourism, Arts and Heritage
Report title	Arts and Heritage Annual Summary Reports 2025-26 and update on Integrated Arts and Heritage Strategy Review
Attachments	Appendix 1 – Arts Annual Report 2025-26 Appendix 1a – Arts Report Summary Detail 2025-26 Appendix 2 – Heritage & Museum Annual Report 2025-26 Appendix 2a – Heritage & Museum Summary Detail 2025-26
File Reference (if applicable)	ART/MUS 03/23-24
Legislation	Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014
Resource Implications	None Narrative:
Screening Requirements	*The Council will commit to consider the implication of all reports under the categories of Section 75, Rural Needs, Data Protection, Climate and Sustainability:* Screening of report not required
Link to Corporate Plan Priority and Outcome	Priority 3: Social

If multiple:

	4. A vibrant, attractive, sustainable Borough for citizens, visitors, businesses and investors If multiple: 5. Safe, welcoming and inclusive communities that are flourishing

Background
The Arts and Heritage Service prepare a summary of its activity in the form of an Annual Summary report. This year, the report has been split into two sections to present each service unit. The report covers all aspects of each service unit and provides a comprehensive overview of its activity and successes. These reports are attached as Appendix 1 and Appendix 2.

In 2025/26 it was identified, through the service planning process, that the Integrated Arts and Heritage Strategy needed to be reviewed due to its expiration (2018-2023 with an extension to 2025). This was included as a key action within the Tourism, Arts and Heritage Service Plan.

Key Issues
Since April 2026, the Arts and Heritage Service has been working with the Transformation Service to review the existing Integrated Arts and Heritage Strategy. The review has been the first stage of the development of an Integrated Arts and Heritage Strategy Action Plan 2027-2023 which will bring a plan for Arts and Heritage in line with the parallel Integrated Tourism, Regeneration and Development Strategy 2018-2030. The review work has been presented to the Arts and Heritage Panel in September 2026 and members have been consulted on early stage identified priorities. A session has also been held internally to engage with relevant services which collaborate regularly with either the Arts or Heritage service or both.

Next Steps
The next stage of consultation is underway with a survey issued on 16 October 2026 across the Council's social media channels and ezines to gain further feedback from users, sector bodies and residents. A further session will be held with the Arts and Heritage Panel prior to finalising key priorities and Action Plan.

Summary
Once the above work is completed the draft Integrated Arts and Heritage Strategy Action Plan 2027-2030 will be brought to the Place and Prosperity Committee for consideration.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Council **Notes** the Arts and Heritage Annual Summary Reports 2025-26 and further notes the progress on the development of the Integrated Arts and Heritage Action Plan 2027-2030.

Ards and North Down Borough Council



Arts
Annual Summary
April 2025-March 2026

ARDS ARTS CENTRE AND ARTS SERVICE OVERVIEW

Ards and North Down Borough Council's Arts Service commenced the 2025/26 year with an operating budget of **£592,300**.

During this year, an organisational restructuring took place with the Arts and Heritage Service moving to the Tourism Arts and Heritage Department within the Place and Prosperity Directorate.
2025/26 saw a continuation of high levels of engagement in the programmes and festivals offered by the service though a change in audience behaviour across the arts sector continues to be observed. Audiences are not booking as far in advance for events, and ticket sales continue to be slower than pre-Covid. Although events and classes are still selling out or with high attendance, the sales are coming in later. This can prove challenging when deciding on the financial viability of an event.
Due to global economic uncertainty and the rise in the cost of living, audiences have less disposable income and are more choosey about what they book for. Locally there is an increasing number of large-scale Belfast based music events and a saturation of festive/seasonal programming in December that can be difficult to compete with.

This year the Arts Centre has seen steady visitor figures, reaching **20,000** visitors in the 2025-26 period (figure excludes events and festivals that take place in other venues)

KEY STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES 2025/26

Arts and Heritage Strategy Review/Departmental Move

A decision was made in early 2025 that the Arts and Heritage services would be moving to the Tourism Dept in August 2025 to form a new Tourism, Arts and Heritage Department and that the direction of a new strategy would be decided by this new position in the Place and Prosperity Directorate.
The services of the Transformation Team were engaged during 2025/26, and a review of the Integrated Arts and Heritage Strategy 2018-2023 has been undertaken.
Consultation with the Arts and Heritage Panel will take place at their AGM in 2026 and recommendations for a way forward made.

AND Arts Network

The development of AND Arts Network continues to be a strategic priority with a rolling application now in place. Monthly bulletins are issued with both ANDBC and other sectoral opportunities, and a commitment has been made to deliver 3 networking events annually. There are 159 current members, with 18 new members this year.

Artist in Residence

During 2025 Officers were made aware of a new Arts Council of Northern Ireland funding pot ringfenced exclusively for Local Authorities to avail of. The funding represented a pilot year of 50/50 match funding with up to £10K available for ANDBC to apply for an artist in residence. A successful application was made and funding secured for a 9-month residency.

Council has partnered with Seacourt Print Workshop in Bangor to host the artist with Seacourt having both the studio space and expertise to mentor the artist during their residency. Imogen Donegan, a multimedia artist from Bangor, was appointed following a public quotation process. Imogen will spend her residency engaging with the community and documenting the changing face of Bangor City.

SECTORAL SUPPORT

The Arts Service is committed to supporting the Arts Sector through training, networking, opportunities and funding. The support ranges from arts organisations to arts activities to individual and youth support in the arts.

The organisations are contributing to the rich arts infrastructure in our area and deliver a large variety of activity, events and engagement that is impossible for the Council to direct deliver. These organisations are a mix of professional arts organisations with paid members of staff, and some are grass roots organisations run completely with volunteers.

We support individuals through offering arts grants through our individual artist, youth and bursary programmes. In addition, the AND Arts Network supports the arts community by offering opportunities directly from the arts service, organising in person and online support events and signposting to opportunities from external organisations.

SUPPORT FOR INDIVIDUALS

Individual Artist Grant Total £2,750

The Artistic Development Scheme is to support Individual artists who are living in the Borough with a maximum grant of £250 towards the cost of specific training or artistic residencies, to enhance their skills and develop their practice.

Over two rounds of this funding stream, 16 applications were received with 7 of them being successful. *See appendix for details*

Youth Arts Training Grant, Total £2,000

This grant is for young people living in the Borough, who wish to undertake short-term or one-off youth arts training or development opportunities. A maximum grant of £250 per applicant is available under the Youth Arts Training Grant. In 25/26, 7 applications were received and 7 were successful. *See appendix for details*

Arts Bursaries
ANDBC offers three creative bursaries with 6 places available: The Tyrone Guthrie Centre (Co. Monaghan) and Ballinglen Arts Foundation (Co. Mayo) bursaries gives artists the opportunity to focus on a specific project or development in their work and further their artistic practice. The John Hewitt Summer School (Co. Armagh) bursary awards a one-week bursary to attend the John Hewitt Summer school including their events and workshops and covers their accommodation and food.
Applicants were asked to clearly demonstrate how they would use the bursary to further their professional practice.
In addition to the three annual arts bursaries, a bursary for a young person to attend the five-day Tradfest summer school in July was offered.
The recipients of all the bursaries awarded can be found in the appendices

Ballinglen Arts Foundation Bursary (Visual Art)
Four applications were received.
Two-week bursary for one recipient.

Tyrone Guthrie Bursary (multi-arts)
Fourteen applications were received for the Tyrone Guthrie Centre.
Four x one-week bursaries were awarded.
One of the four bursaries is prioritised for an artist with a disability. The award was created in memory of Chris Ledger through the development of the Arts and Disability Working Group.

Professional Development
We have moved away from structured topic-based training sessions as these are currently offered through Boom Studios Trade programme.

AND Arts Network is our main communication tool to the sector and we offer many opportunities. In 2025/26 there were three in person events. In partnership with ACNI, in November 2025 a Digital and Immersive Arts showcase took place in Ards Arts Centre - 6 digital technologies/artists were showcased and included an animated story dome, art works that were animated via an app and app-based heritage storytelling. Approximately 30 attended across the 2 sessions.
In August an AND Arts Network Social took place at the home studio of textile artist/designer Prof. Jane McCann with the focus on Sustainability and Your Practice (no matter your discipline).

There were presentations by Jane McCann, Sirpa Morsky and Matthew Malcolm, Creative Industries Development Officer for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Local artist, Sarah Majury provided a printmaking activity. 23 people attended.

In February 2026, an artist's showcase and networking event took place in North Down Museum celebrating the talent of local musicians, dancers, poets and sculptors in our area. It was a small gathering with twelve people in attendance. Although small in numbers, the feedback was very positive and additional collaborative projects were developed as an outcome of this event including an exhibition in Stormont.

Aspects Festival Club

Set up as a regular meet up for aspiring writers and poets to showcase new work to a supportive small audience. The group has been successful in developing writing, which has also supported wellbeing in multiple areas including isolation (some participants attend on their own) and friendships. The process of writing and performing personal work including subjects around fear, trauma, abuse, and memoir has been therapeutic for many. The Festival Club has also been able to signpost these aspiring writers to development opportunities in this field. It has been a key professional development tool in the writing genre. Responding to those in attendance who wished to meet more often and build momentum, from September 2025, the Festival Club has met monthly rather than 3 times per year.

SUPPORT For ORGANISATIONS

Multi-Annual Arts Grants £32,000
Awarded 2024-26

The 2025-26 year was the second year of a two-year award programme. Arts organisations can receive up to £5,000 towards Core Costs to run a 12-month programme of arts activity with a venue; and up to £4,000 for support in the delivery of a large annual arts event/festival.

This support gives arts organisations the ability to plan ahead in their programming and delivery. Continuing on from 2024/25, seven organisations received money through this funding stream. *See appendix for details*

Arts Project Fund Total £11,000

The Arts Project Fund is open to arts, community and special interest groups throughout the borough who wish to enhance existing and undertake new community arts activities. Grants of up to £1,000 are available. In two rounds, a total of 18 applications were made, totaling £17,166 requested in funding. 11 Applications were successful and £10,710 was awarded in funding. *See appendix for details*

SLA Portico

A Service Level Agreement remains in place with Portico in Portaferry representing ongoing support following a successful pilot audience development project in 2017/18. The funding has enabled Portico to deliver a diverse programme of community arts engagement in the Upper Ards, helping to ensure an equitable distribution of arts events across the Borough. In this time, they have successfully engaged with over 9,000 community members across diverse demographics. Events funded included Portico's Early Bird Choir, 4 events as part of Portaferry Gala and the Sails and Sounds Festival, festive events and live film scores performed on Portico's organ bringing art house cinema to the area.

In this period Portico presented over 60 other arts events, providing accessible events, reaching the vulnerable and often underrepresented populations who would otherwise lack local access to quality arts experiences.

Beat Carnival - Beach of Dreams
Beach of Dreams was a community arts and climate action programme delivered by Belfast-based Beat Carnival across the Ards Peninsula, with £20,000 support from Ards and North Down Borough Council. It used creativity, walking and participation to explore coastal identity, wellbeing and climate action, culminating in the UK-wide walking arts festival from 1 May to 1 June 2025.

From January to May 2025, Beat Carnival worked with local groups to create artwork and performance material inspired by coastal stories and environmental awareness. Events in Ballywalter, Ballyhalbert, Portavogie, Cloughey and Portaferry built momentum for the Millisle Beach finale on 17 May 2025.

The finale combined community artwork, performance, environmental engagement and celebration across the beach, lagoon, field and park. Highlights included around 500 decorated pennants, sand art, workshops, storytelling, ecology stalls, a beach clean, marine touch-tank, procession and the original **Our Siren Song** performance, with a piper and boats creating a strong sense of journey and connection.

Supported by ANDBC, National Lottery Community Fund Awards for All, Beach of Dreams, Beat Carnival and Arts Council of Northern Ireland, the programme was a success, with strong participation and a striking beach installation reinforcing its environmental message. Total participation figures are recorded as 2,725 with total audience of 4,500 total event-day audience. *Further breakdown in appendices.*

EDUCATION

Ards Arts Centre offers a comprehensive programme of weekly creative classes over 3 annual terms. In addition, a series of one-day workshops and summer programmes are offered.

Classes cover a variety of mediums from Flamenco guitar and floral art to various crafts, painting and drawing techniques with the offering reviewed annually and amended to ensure that the programme is financially viable.
Engagement in hands-on creative activity has proven benefits for wellbeing by helping people connect while fostering enjoyment, creativity, confidence, learning, and improved quality of life. Ards Arts Centre's Creative Class Programme attracts regular weekly footfall and provides a fun, social environment for people to connect and get creative.
Two outreach classes in Illustration and Calligraphy are also provided at Donaghadee Community Centre following pilots offered at several external sites.
Artist Talks and workshops are offered where appropriate alongside the Centre's exhibition programme giving an insight into the artists inspiration and process.

The programme also includes a weekly Community Choir 'Ards Voice' that attracts an average attendance of >50 participants, the Cuan Craic Drama Group in Kircubbin, facilitated by Jenny Long, and Knit & Knatter, a self-led knitting circle.

Two Summer Schemes took place, one in Donaghadee Community Centre and one at Ards Arts Centre. Both schemes were fully booked with 40 children attending across the two schemes. The Ards Summer scheme is a full day scheme involving arts and crafts, drama and pottery where Donaghadee is a half day arts and craft scheme

In 2025/26 Ards Arts Centre's Education programme engaged 841 people.

PROGRAMMING

In 2025/26 the Arts Service programmed 21 events that attracted nearly 5,000 attendees

The Arts Service continues to offer a comprehensive and accessible annual programme of events that includes exhibitions, music, theatre and seasonal offerings. In addition, five annual festivals take place; Ards International Guitar Festival, Creative Peninsula, Aspects Literature Festival, Ards Puppet Festival and Leid AND Lairn.

With the AND Culture Guide released three times per annum the programme offers residents and visitors alike opportunities to engage in the arts. Annual events including Arts Night at the Museum, the Friday Night Live series and seasonal performances by the Ulster Orchestra remain hugely popular. Following a pilot performance in autumn 2024, a new seasonal lunchtime performance by Northern Ireland Opera has been introduced. Feedback suggested that some audiences preferred to attend a daytime event – particularly in the winter months.

This creative programming provides enjoyment, social connection and a shared cultural experience that leads to a sense of pride and belonging. The Arts Service contributes to improved quality of life and helps make culture accessible and making Ards and North Down a better place to live and visit.

EXHIBITIONS

Ards Arts Centre offers an annual programme of visual art and craft exhibitions across the Georgian and Sunburst Galleries with 24 taking place in 2025/26.

Exhibitions are programmed through a public call-out and direct approaches made by Officer's. The exhibition programme ensures a variety of mediums on offer and that there are representations of emerging and established artists and touring and community interest exhibitions for visitors to view. With regularly changing exhibits, Ards Arts Centre provides a platform for local, national and international artists to exhibit and has built a strong reputation in the visual art fields for quality exhibitions and for supporting local artists.

A highlight of the 2025/26 programme was a high-profile portrait photography exhibition *Resonators* by Scarlet Page (daughter of Led Zeppelin's Jimmy). This took place as part of Ards International Guitar Festival and attracted a new demographic of audience to the gallery who came to hear Scarlet interviewed by BBC's Ralph McLean. The Arts Centre was honoured to host a career retrospective *Drawn Together* featuring the sketches and paintings/prints of acclaimed artist Ricard Croft who passed away in 2025.

The Arts Service exhibition programme attracted footfall of over 20,000 and works to the value of £3,060 were sold.

ForM Sculpture Exhibition

The ForM Sculpture Exhibition takes place annually at Bangor Castle Walled Garden throughout the month of June. The stunning surroundings of the garden in full bloom is given an added dimension with around 40 sculptures within the walls. It is an exhibition which supports development for early career artists who are looking for opportunities to exhibit as the application process focuses on the response to the garden and the ability to create good quality work. It also shows an eclectic mix using a variety of materials suitable for outdoors. It encourages artists to push their work in a different direction whilst exhibiting in one of the few outdoor exhibitions in Ireland. The exhibition's reputation has spread, and we are aware of visitors travelling specifically to Bangor to see it. It is a successful partnership project across Council departments, and the gardeners are very supportive, feeling that the exhibition attracts new visitors to the garden. Approximately 3,000 visitors engaged with the exhibition.
A panel of arts specialists viewed the exhibition before the launch event and chose works which they thought deserved a special award.

Aspects Festival Exhibition

In 2025 an opportunity was offered through the AND Arts Network to apply to exhibition for the month of September in Bangor Carnegie Library as part of Aspects Festival. The criteria were that the work should be connected or inspired by writing and fit within the context of the festival. Three proposals were received and the exhibition was offered to Bangor artist Pauline Little, who exhibited around 40 abstract paintings, some of which were inspired by the poetry of Michael Longley. Bangor Carnegie Library has no mechanism to record accurate attendance figures, but they estimated the visitor number at approximately 300.

COMMUNITY ARTS DEVELOPMENT

Community arts development plays an important role in increasing access to the arts, strengthening community connections, supporting wellbeing, and developing local creative talent.

Community Arts Development Highlights
Programmes during the period extended access to creative activity across the Borough, with a particular focus on rural communities, older people, wellbeing, participation and community celebration.

Rural Arts Engagement
A £6,420 Arts Council NI award supported Our Siren Song, a 10-month Beat Carnival partnership delivered across eight Ards Peninsula villages. The project engaged 581 participants through 38 carnival arts, singing, storytelling and textile workshops, culminating in community celebration events in Portaferry and Millisle as part of Beach of Dreams.
Peggy, Francis and Me, delivered by Peninsula Healthy Living and Cre8 Theatre with support from Community Arts Development, celebrated local stories and characters from the Ards Peninsula. The production toured eight venues across the Borough, reaching audiences of over 500 and receiving very positive feedback. Funded through Arts Council NI and MTD SEED Funding.

Older People
The Age Friendly Creatives programme, partnered with County Down Rural Community Network and received £8,500 from Arts Council NI to provide friendship-themed workshops for 16 older people's groups, engaging around 240 participants through 128 artist-led facilitation hours. The programme also supported Cuan Craic Drama Group in Kircubbin, enabling members to continue weekly drama sessions, develop their *Daft Eddie* performance and take part in wider arts activity including Beach of Dreams.

Young People
Summer schemes reached full capacity, and schools' engagement was supported through dedicated performances and creative activity, including the Christmas Show which drew strong public and schools' audiences and The Next Generation Student Art Exhibition which featured work from students representing schools including Bangor Academy, Regent House, Glastry College, Bangor Grammar, Glenlola Collegiate, Strangford College, and Movilla High School.

Community Events
The Grant Celebration Event at Queen's Hall brought together over 100 attendees and showcased 14 presentations and performances, highlighting 146 grants and bursaries awarded since 2022.

Cuan Craic performed in December and June to older people's groups in Holywood and Kircubbin engaging total audiences of 160.

ARTS FESTIVALS

All festival events and attendance can be found in the appendices

Ards International Guitar Festival 09-13 April

The thriving annual festival offered 5 days of guitar-based concerts, free fringe events, a classic album brunch and an exhibition of rock photography by acclaimed photographer Scarlet Page. 17 events took place with 87% of available tickets sold with the highest door take to date recorded at £12,303

The festival originated due to the location of high-end guitar makers in Newtownards, then Lowden Guitars, and more recently Avalon Guitars. The festival continues to act as platform for local musicians to play alongside international acts and provides affordable, accessible and unique music programming for both residents and visitors alike.

Guitar Clinics were not delivered this year due to declining sales, limited financial viability and low attendance, which also eased operational pressures. The children's event was moved from Ards Arts Centre to Queen's Hall to increase capacity, selling 182 tickets and proving the change worthwhile.

An 'Unplugged' event first introduced in 2024 took place with Ards own rocker Ricky Warwick and the Q&A style event has proven popular, and it is intended to make this an annual event. Other highlights included legendary New York based guitarist Gary Lucas the viral Italian sensation Luca Stricagnoli, and the Rob Strong Band. This was a career retrospective gig for Rob who has been on the Blues circuit since the 1950's! He was the grateful recipient of the 2025 Lifetime Achievement Award The award was hand made by local ceramicist Andrew Cooke.

2026 will see the 30th anniversary of the event and with new owners at the Avalon Guitar factory in place there are plans to celebrate the relationship and milestone anniversary.

Creative Peninsula August 2025

The 24th Creative Peninsula Festival took place in August as part of the Ireland wide August Craft Month.

The thriving annual festival provides a platform for highlighting the artists and makers of the borough and offering opportunities for engagement, selling, and providing attendees with opportunities to try their hand at creative activities.

The festival is an economic and tourism driver for the brough and highlights a unique selling point in the high volume of artists and makers who are proud to call the borough their home. Anecdotally, they are inspired by the natural beauty of the area. Applications for participation are made via the AND Arts Network membership.

The festival comprises a series of exhibitions, maker demonstrations, workshops at Ards Arts Centre and in artists' own studios, an open studio series and an artist-in-residence opportunity.

The Twilight Market and Arts Night are an anchor event of the programme with 22 artists/makers trading in Conway Square. 2025 saw the highest volume of footfall and participants to date. The addition of a small bar, a small number of food vendors, and additional entertainment have encouraged people to stay for longer.
Approximately 4,000 attended this event with 1,500 coming into the Arts Centre to enjoy the exhibition and Arts Night demonstrations.

A total of 39 separate events took place with over 6,000 attendees, including general visitors to North Down Museum.

In an extension of the Creative Peninsula brand, the annual Christmas Fayre took place in early December to coincide with the national Small Business Saturday campaign. The Fayre presents an opportunity for residents and visitors to 'shop local' and support local creative businesses. 20 artists and makers took stalls, and we welcomed 2,920 visitors over two days – note. Weather has impacted the event in recent years with Friday again proving stormy, however those who were in attendance made purchases and overall, the level of sales increased from 2024 and footfall was nearly double. A higher level of engagement is required by the artists and makers to make this event viable, and Officers acknowledge that there has been a notable increase in other craft fayres in recent years, and the market is somewhat saturated.

Aspects Irish Literature Festival 24 September – 5 October 2025
Aspects Irish Literature Festival serves to celebrate that long history of writing in the area and from across the island. It is now one of the longest running literature festivals in Ireland at 34 years in 2025.
Its purpose is to educate, entertain, develop, support and inspire, with a programme based around writing, storytelling, and books. Events take place in various venues across Bangor and include talks and activities exploring a mix of genres - history to politics, poetry to songwriting, journalism to fiction.
Notable events in 2025 were Dara McNaulty book launch, *David Trimble, Peacemaker* with Stephen Walker and Lady Hermon, and Carol Drinkwater. There was a total of 25 events that took place over 12 days; 1539 tickets were sold plus approximately 300 + attendance at the exhibition.

1,529 attended plus exhibition attendance. This was an increase of 15% in attendance from the previous year.
A lack of a dedicated venue can be challenging but the support and use of multiple venues gives variety and character to the Festival.

Young Aspects Festival Friday 27 February – Sunday 1 March 2026
A weekend of creativity for children and young people took place over three days around World Book Day. The Young Aspects Festival delivers a programme which encourages literacy, imagination and creativity in young people through writing events,

workshops, and experiences.which are a mix of both free and ticketed activities. There were a total of 12 events in Bangor and 121 young people attended.

Ards Puppet Festival - 26 & 27 October

Ards Puppet Festival returned to Ards Arts Centre for two days of performances, workshops and family activities. The puppet festival celebrates one of the world's oldest art forms, providing families and audiences with opportunities to experience imaginative storytelling, high-quality performances, creative learning, and cultural heritage in an engaging and accessible way.

Highlights included shows from Sea Legs Puppet Theatre, Lempen Theatre Company, the *Woodland Wonderland*, the Flea Circus, and Professor Queen Bee's Punch and Judy.

The festival attracted approximately 1,000 attendees, with most performances close to capacity. A total of 509 tickets were sold for theatre performances, generating £2,519 income (the majority of the festival is free to attend). Audience feedback was overwhelmingly positive, particularly praising the imaginative atmosphere, staff engagement, and high-quality performances.

A festival highlight was the partnership with Handmade Theatre, which delivered *Woodland Wonderland* and gave four local puppeteers the opportunity to perform alongside a professional company, supporting artist development and community engagement.

The festival provided a memorable experience for children and families and received positive media coverage, reinforcing its popularity and value to the local community.

Future development includes plans for outreach partnership, continued partnerships opportunities for local artists and engagement with the community.

Leid AND Lairn – Ulster-Scots Festival October/November 2025

An allocation of £10,000 was made to develop an Ulster Scots Programme to raise awareness of the culture and heritage of Ulster Scots in the Borough, A pilot festival took place in 2024. This resulted in the development of the Leid AND Lairn Festival (language and learn)

What sets Leid AND Lairn apart from the other Arts Service's festivals is that it is a cross-departmental effort with Officers from Arts and Heritage, Tourism and Good Relations contributing to the month-long programme featuring music, storytelling, literature, talks, tours and activity for schools.

An addition to the 2025 programme was a series of activities in partnership with the Ulster Folk Museum including the commissioning of new work by Joshua Burnside. North Down Museum continues to support local historical societies through the provision of £1,000 in grant aid for Ulster-Scots talks annually. The decision was made to increase this pot to £2,500 to enable groups to apply for events as well.

A total of 11 events took place at venues including North Down Museum, Ards Arts Centre, Bangor Castle, Ards VIC and the Ulster Folk Museum.
Attendance at Arts Service delivered/supported events totaled 419 and highlights of the programme included a lunchtime recital by Lisa Dawson, and an enchanting performance by contemporary traditional musicians TRÚ. Commissioned walking tours of Newtownards with Valhalla Street Theatre didn't draw an audience this year, which was disappointing. These are under review for 2026. 40% of respondents stated that the event improved their knowledge and understanding of Ulster-Scots heritage in Ards and North Down whilst only 20% stated that it improved their knowledge and understanding of Ulster-Scots language

MEDIA AND ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

1st April 2025 – 31 March 2026
The Arts and Heritage Service continued to benefit from a strong social media presence during this time-period, with **7.8K followers** on the Culture Ards and North Down Facebook page, an additional **2.8K followers** on the Guitar Festival Facebook page, and **4K followers** on Instagram. Collectively, the Culture social media channels increased their audience by **2.4K followers** compared to the previous year.

Between **1 April 2025 and 31 March 2026**, the ANDculture website attracted **36K active users** and recorded **150K page views**. The website's *What's On* page accounted for **11.1K page views** during this period.

Mailing List

The combined Arts and Heritage ANDculture mailing list currently includes over **5.1K subscribers**, segmented across a range of audience groups. A monthly *What's On* e-newsletter is distributed to **3.2K subscribers**, highlighting upcoming activity across the Arts and Heritage Service. The newsletter achieved an average open rate of **57%** during the reporting period.

Top Performing Social Media Posts by Reach

The highest-performing organic Arts posts during **2025/26**, based on organic reach, were:

- Arts Centre Exhibition Open Call (Instagram, 20/08/25) – **18.1K**
- Funding Spotlight: Harry Douglas (Facebook, 08/06/25) – **17.4K**
- Our Siren Song Festival (Facebook, 12/05/25) – **16.2K**
- What does the sea sing to you? – Siren Song Festival (Facebook, 30/04/25) – **14.1K**
- Aspects Festival: Stephen Walker & Lady Hermon Event (Facebook, 10/08/25) – **10.2K**
- ForM Sculpture Exhibition Open Call (Facebook, 27/12/25) – **7.3K**

- Creative Peninsula Twilight Market (Facebook, 25/07/25) – **6.7K**

In addition to organic content, paid digital advertising campaigns were delivered for **Guitar Festival**, **Creative Peninsula**, and **Aspects Festival**, contributing to increased reach and visibility across the Culture channels.

Culture Ards and North Down Social Media Performance

Culture Ards and North Down Facebook (1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026)

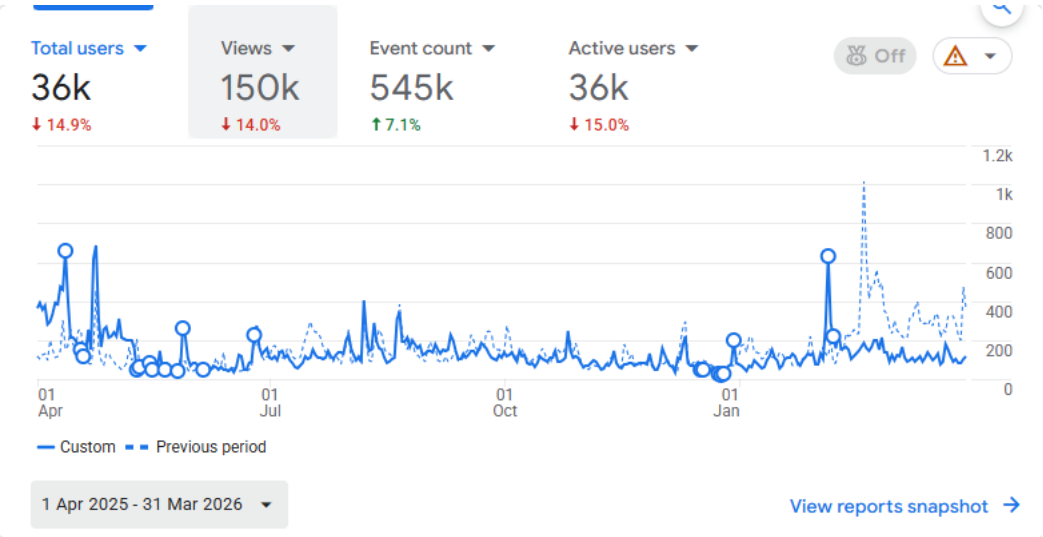
- Facebook Views: Facebook content generated 2.4M views during the reporting period.
- Facebook Interactions: Facebook content received 19.3K interactions, an increase of 108.8%.
- Facebook visits: The Culture Ards and North Down Facebook page recorded 27.5K visits, an increase of 68.3%.
-

Culture Ards and North Down Instagram (1 April 25 – 31 March 26)

- Instagram Views: Instagram content recorded 324.0K views, representing a 100% increase.
- Instagram Interactions: Instagram content generated 8K interactions, representing a 100% increase.
- Instagram visits: The Culture Ards and North Down Instagram profile recorded 5.9K visits, an increase of 121%.

Website:

ANDCulture Website Stats 1 April 2025– 31 March 2026 (G4 Analytics):



Website analytics for the period **1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026** recorded **36K total users**, **150K views**, **545K event count**, and **36K active users**.

Note: Any reduction in website traffic should be considered within the context of changing online search behaviours, with more users accessing information through AI-generated search results and summaries rather than visiting websites directly.

PR Activity:

During the reporting period, the Arts and Heritage Marketing Officer distributed **53 media releases**, generating a wide range of media coverage across local newspapers, online publications and, TV and radio interviews.

A comprehensive record of media coverage is available in the media book, this can be provided on request:

Arts and Heritage PR Coverage 25-26.pdf

Sectoral Support – Individuals

Tyrone Guthrie Bursaries Awarded		
Cameron Tharmaratnam	Actor/Writer/Filmmaker	1 week
Sheena Devitt	Sculptor	1 week
Claire Mitchell	Writer	1 week
Kerrie Hanna	Visual artist	1 week

John Hewitt Bursary Awarded
Amy Louise Wyatt (poet)

Ballinglen Bursary Awarded
Maya Todd (visual Artist)

Tradfest Bursary Awarded
Sara Bittles (Bango)

Professional Development/ Arts Network events		
	Sessions Delivered	Attendance
2025/26	2 events	35

Individual Artist Grants	Medium	Awarded
Jenni Robinson	Artist	£250
Richard Clements	Actor/writer/musician	£250
Timothy Dywer	Writer	£250
Imogen Donegan	Visual artist	£250
Jan McCullough	Visual artist	£250
Jane McCann	Visual artist	£250
Mandy Horton	Visual artist	£250
Total awarded		**£1,710**

Arts Annual Report 2025-26

Appendix 1a

Youth Arts Grant	Training	Awarded
Maya McKnight	James Huish Academy	£200
Mia Hegarty	NYCNI Girls Choir	£250
Isobel Myles	Ulster Youth Orchestra	£250
Holly Robinson	Ulster Youth Orchestra	£250
Boris Robinson	Intl Trumpet Guild	£50
Niamh Scates	Joffrey Ballet School	£250
Harry Douglas	Ulster Youth Orchestra	£250
Total		**£1,500**

Aspects Festival Club		
	Sessions delivered	**Attendance**
2025/26	7	197

General Footfall – Ards Arts Centre, The Town Hall, Newtownards

Month	Footfall
Apr-25	2,008
May-25	1,670
Jun-25	1,522
Jul-25	1,112
Aug-25	1,832
Sep-25	1,695
Oct-25	1,573
Nov-25	3,029
Dec-25	2,050
Jan-26	992
Feb-26	1,315
Mar-26	1,171
TOTAL	**19,969**

Arts Annual Report 2025-26 **Appendix 1a**

Arts Project Grants 25/26	**2025-26**	
Name of Organisation	**Project**	**Amount awarded**
AMH New Horizons	Pottery Workshop Programme	£1000
Bangor Speech Festival	Festival activities	£1000
Kilcooley Women's Centre	Harp playing workshops	£1000
Peninsula Healthy Living	Older Peoples Theatre and Storytelling Programme	£1000
Portaferry Community Services	Music and Drama Workshops	£1000
Portico	Choral workshops and performance	£1000
Valhalla	Workshops and development of Historical walking tour of Comber	£990
Boom! Studios	Eco Artists – The Art of Environmental Sustainability	£1,000
Holywood Shared Town	World Music Concert Series for Primary Schools	£1,000
Kilmood Art Club	Art in the Community	£760
Orchardville	Orchardville Performs	£960
Total		£10,710

Multi-Annual Arts Grants	**2024-26**	
Name of the Organisation	**Amount Awarded**	
Seacourt Print Workshop	Core Support	£5,000
Boom Studios	Core Support	£5,000
Portico of Ards Ltd	Core Support	£5,000
Kilkooley Women's Centre	Core Support	£5,000
Holywood Music Festival	Core Support	£4,000
Bangor Choral Festival	Core Support	£3,000
Bangor Drama Festival	Core Support	£5,000
Total Awarded		**£32,000**

Arts Annual Report 2025-26 **Appendix 1a**

Programming 2025/26

Month	Event	Genre	Location	Capacity	Attendance	% sold
Apr-25	Music in the Chamber - Aisling Agnew/Richard Allen	Music - Classical	Bangor Castle	100	100	100.00%
	Guitar Festival - *See Festivals*	Music - Multi	Multiple - Ards			
May-25	Friday Night Live - Colm Gavin & Kenan Flannery	Music - Folk	Ards Arts Centre	70	28	40.00%
	Friday Night Live - Mandy Bingham	Music - Folk	Ards Arts Centre		*Cancelled*	
	Beach of Dreams	Multi-Arts	Millisle Beach Park			
	Music in the Chamber - Cua	Music - Trad	Bangor Castle	100	42	42.00%
Jun-25	Friday Night Live - Ken haddock	Music - Blues/Folk	Ards Arts Centre	70	70	100.00%
	Ulster Orchestra Quintet	Music - Classical	Bangor Abbey	250	248	99.20%
	ForM Sculpture Exhibition - *see Exhibitions*	Visual Art				
	ForM - Late Night Art	Visual Art	Walled Garden		18	
Jul-25	Summer Scheme - *see Education*	Multi-Arts	D'dee Community Centre			
Aug-25	Creative Penisula - s*ee Festivals*	Visual Art/Craft	Borough wide			
	Summer Scheme - *see Education*	Multi-Arts	Ards Arts Centre			
Sep-25	Friday Night Live - Matt McGinn	Music - Folk	Ards Arts Centre	70	71	101.43%
	Aspects Festival - *see Festivals*	Literature	Multiple - bangor			
Oct-25	Broken String Band	Music - Bluegrass	Ards Arts Centre	70	72	102.86%
	Thicker Than Water	Theatre	Studio 1A - Bangor	100	44	44.00%
	Puppet Festival - *see Festivals*	Theatre	Ards Arts Centre			
Nov-25	Friday Night Live - Anthony Toner	Music - Folk	Ards Arts Centre	70	71	101.43%
	Leid AND Lairn - TRU	Music - Trad	Bangor Castle	100	71	71.00%
	Leid AND Laird - Lisa Dawson	Music - Piano	Ards Arts Centre	70	35	50.00%
	The Christmassy Christmas Show	Theatre	Queen's Hall, Ards	250	184	73.60%

Arts Annual Report 2025-26 **Appendix 1a**

Month	Event	Genre	Location	Capacity	Attendance	% sold
Dec-25	Creative Peninsula Christmas Fayre	Visual Art/Craft	Ards Arts Centre	4000	2920	73.00%
	Music in the Chamber - Arco String Quartet	Music - Classical	Bangor Castle	100	100	100.00%
Jan-26	Friday Night Live - The High Lonesome	Music - bluegrass	Ards Arts Centre	70	59	84.29%
Feb-26	Friday Night Live - Ben Reel	Music - Blues	Ards Arts Centre	70	70	100.00%
	Music in the Chamber - Ards CCE	Music - Trad	Bangor Castle	100	100	100.00%
	Young Aspects Festival - *see Festivals*	Literature	Multiple - Bangor			
Mar-26	Friday Night Live - Glass Half Full	Music - Trad	Ards Arts Centre	70	70	100.00%
	NI Opera Spring Concert	Music - Classical	Ards Arts Centre	70	66	94.29%
	Arts Night at the Musem	Visual Art/Craft	North Down Museum	450	450	100.00%
					4889	**TOTAL**

Education Programme
2025/26

Term 1	**May/June 2025**	**6 week term**	
Class	**Tutor**	**# weekly classes**	**Attendance per class**
Sketchbook drawing	Pandora Butterfield	1	6
Ceramics	Tracey Johnston	1	12
Oils/Acrylics	Pandora Butterfield	1	12
Illustration	Bernice Anderson	2	16
Mosaic Making	Geraldine Cooper	1	5
Experimental Drawing	Jo Hatty	1	6
Silversmithing	Diane Lyness	1	8
Calligraphy	Jacquie Brachi	1	16
Drawing Skills	Lee Boyd	1	16

Term 2	**Sept-Nov 2025**	**8-10 week term**	
Class	**Tutor**	**# weekly classes**	**Attendance per class**
Sketchbook drawing	Pandora Butterfield	1	16
Ceramics	Tracey Johnston	1	9
Watercolour	Trisha Campbell	2	16
Printmaking	Rosie Ennis	1	10

Arts Annual Report 2025-26

Appendix 1a

Class	Tutor	# weekly classes	Attendance per class
Illustration	Bernice Anderson	2	16
Mosaic Making	Geraldine Cooper	1	9
Floral Art	Maureen Mulligan	2	8
Silversmithing	Diane Lyness	1	8
Calligraphy	Jacquie Brachi	1	16
Drawing Skills	Lee Boyd	1	6

Term 3	January-March 2026	6 and 10 week term	
Class	**Tutor**	**Sessions**	**Attendance**
Oils/Acrylics	Pandora Butterfield	1	12
Ceramics	Tracey Johnston	1	12
Watercolour	Trisha Campbell	2	16
Printmaking	Rosie Ennis	1	10
Learn to Knit	Christine Casey	1	9
Illustration	Bernice Anderson	2	16
Mosaic Making	Geraldine Cooper	1	10
Mindful Drawing	Jo Hatty	1	11
Floral Art	Maureen Mulligan	1	13
Silversmithing	Diane Lyness	1	8
Calligraphy	Jacquie Brachi	1	16
Drawing Practice	Elaine Burke	1	12

One day Workshops	April 2025-March 2026		
Workshop	**Tutor**	**Sessions**	**Attendance per session**
Silver Necklace or Earrings	Diane Lyness	1	10
Introduction to Painting	Pandora Butterfield	1	14
Expressive Charcoal Drawing	Elaine Burke	1	12
Still-Life Painting	Pandora Butterfield	1	12
Silver rings	Diane Lyness	1	10
Silver Link Bracelet	Diane Lyness	1	6
Acrylic Painting	Kim Montgomery (exhibition)	1	5
Cyanotype	Ruth Osborne	1	10

Summer Scheme	Donaghadee		
Class	**Tutors**	**Sessions**	**Attendance**
1 week August 4 - 8th	Bernice Anderson	1	20

Arts Annual Report 2025-26

Appendix 1a

Summer Scheme	**Newtownards**		
Class	**Tutors** Cr8 Theatre	**Sessions**	**Attendance per session**
1 week August 11-15th	Bernice Anderson Ellen Cunningham	1	20

Artist Talks	**Apr 2025-Mar 2026**
Artist	**Attendance**
Betty Brown 1:12 Scale	25
ForM Tour - Amanda Croft	30
Helen Merrigan Colfer	14
Drawn Together - Amanda Croft	50
Leah Davis	20
Bernie McAdam	18

Children's one day	**Tutors**	**Sessions**	**Attendance per session**
Bug Drawing	Adele Pound	2	10
Kev F Comic Masterclass	Kevin Sutherland	2	30
Clayful Minds	Rebeccah Leeson	1	14
Express Yourself	Bernice Anderson	1	17

Arts Annual Report 2025-26

Appendix 1a

Exhibitions
2025-26

Date	Artist	Medium	Gallery/Space	Footfall	Sales*	Notes
20 Feb - 13 Apr	Keith Drury	Painting	Sunburst	1,646	£45	
20 Mar - 13 Apr	Scartlet Page - *Guitar Festival*	Photography	Georgian	1,002	NFS	
22 Apr - 17 May	Jonathan Conlon	painting	Georgian	785	£320	
22 Apr - 17 May	Betty Brown	Sculpture / painting	Sunburst	785	£850	
22 May - 25 June	Elaine Burke	Drawing / installation	Georgian	645	£635	
22 May - 25 June	Joanna McNulty	Photography / sculpture	Sunburst	645		
1 - 30 June	ForM Sculpture Exhibition	Sculpture	Walled Garden	3000		sales direct to artists
3 - 23 July	Next Generation Schools Exhibition	Mixed Media	Georgian	758	NFS	
3 - 23 July	Next Generation Schools Exhibition	Mixed Media	Sunburst	758	NFS	
30 Jul - 30 Aug	Creative Peninsula	Mixed Media	Georgian	1,723	£520	100% to artist no commission
Aug	CP - Artist in Residence - Lauren Ciaran Magill	Painting	Sunburst	1,723		
Aug	Creative Peninsula at Ards VIC	Mixed Media	Ards VIC	1302		
Aug	Creative Peninsula at Castle Espie	Mixed Media	Castle Espie			footfall requested

4 - 27 Sept	Pauline Little - *Aspects Festival*	Painting	Bangor Library	300		sales direct to artists
4 -27 Sept	Leah Davis	Painting	Georgian	517		
4 -27 Sept	Linen Biennale - Zoe Gibson	Textiles	Sunburst	517	£495	
2 - 22 Oct	Ben Reilly	Sculpture	Georgian	193*		*193 up to 11 Oct. Gallery Footfall Cam offline from 13 Oct - 28 Oct. Did not record data in this time period
Date	**Artist**	**Medium**	**Gallery/Space**	**Footfall**	**Sales***	**Notes**
2 - 22 Oct	David McKinney	photography	Sunburst	193*	£75	
30 Oct - 6 Nov	Ards Football Club 125 Anniversary	memorabilia	Georgian	1,138	NFS	
13 Nov - 3 Dec	Patrick Hickey	painting	Georgian	865		
31 Oct - 3 Dec	Bernie McAdam	painting/print	Sunburst	865		
11 Dec 25 - 17 Jan 26	Helen Merrigan Colfer	Sculpture	Georgian	832		Footfall Camera fault from
11 Dec 25 - 17 Jan 26	Oliver Galbraith	Photography	Sunburst	832	£30	
22 Jan - 21 Feb	Rosalind Lowry, Sheena Devitt, Rozzi Kennedy	Sculpture / painting	Georgian	467*	£35	*467 up to 13 Feb. Gallery Footfall Cam fault from this period onwards and no data collected
22 Jan - 21 Feb	Kim Montgomery	painting	Sunburst	467*	£100	
26 Feb - 21 March	Richard Croft Retrospective/Tribute	Drawing and painting	Georgian	600*	NFS	*Estimation based on last years figures for same period, however this was a popular exhibition so actual figure likely to be higher
26 Feb - 21 March	Richard Croft Retrospective/Tribute	Drawing and painting	Sunburst	600*	NFS	
TOTAL				**20,638**	**TOTAL**	

**** 10 % commision retained by Ards Arts Centre***

Community Engagement

Activity	Participants	Audiences
Age Friendly Creatives	250	300
Ruaral Arts Engagement Programmes	640	5,000+
Tea Dance x 3	300+	
Next Generation Student Art Exhibition	79	500+
Schools Christmas Show		165
Grant Celebration Event	18	120

Beach of Dreams		
Workshop participant (38 workshops)	581	
12 x Story Sessions	247	
16 x art walks	180	
5 x choir rehearsals	100	
6 x rowing sessions	20	
Youth volunteers	7	
Drop-in workshops at festival	1000	
Parade participants	500	
Finale Performers	90	
Event Day audience		4,500
Total	**2725**	**4,500**

Ards International Guitar Festival 2025

Date	Event	Genre	Location	Capacity	Attendance	% sold
Sat 05 April	Kyle Riley -Little Folk - On the Road	Folk/Pop	Queen's Hall	200	182	91%
Wed 09 April	Gary Lutton and Decdlan Zappala	Acoustic Percussive	Ards Arts Centre	70	70	100%
Thu 10 April	Scarlet Page/Resonators w Ralph McLean	Q&A - Rock	Ards Arts Centre	50	50	100%
	Ricky Warwick in conversation with Ralph McLean	Q&A Rock	Ards Arts Centre	90	90	100%
Fri 11 April	Free Fringe - Amanda Agnew	Americana/Folk	Ards Arts Centre	50	50	100%
	Gary Lucas with support from Ellen Lyons	Jazz	Ards Arts Centre	70	51	69%
	Luca Stricagnoli with support from John Tracey	Acoutic Percussive	Queens Hall	200	117	58%
Sat 12 April	Free Fringe - Ali Mooney/Ian Alexander	Folk/Country	Ards Arts Centre	50	50	100%
	Free Fringe - Jordan Lively	Trad	Ards Arts Centre	50	50	100%
	Classical Guitar Society NI & Eire Guitar Duo	Classical	Ards Arts Centre	70	63	90%
	Greatest Riffs of All Time - Junior Afrifa	Rock	Ivy Bar	63	63	100%

	The Frank Carbery Blues Band/Rob Strong Band	Blues	Queen's Hall	190	181	93%
Sun 13 April	Brunch - Gary Moore featuring Albert Mills	Blues/Rock	Ards Arts Centre	60	54	90%
	Cormac Neeson	Americana	Ivy Bar	60	60	100%
	Songwriters In The Round		Ards Arts Centre	60	47	78%
					1178	

Creative Peninsula 2025			**Location**	**Capacity**	**Attendance**	**% sold**
29 July - 21 Sept	Exhibition: The Creative Peninsula	Cafe Gallery	North Down Museum		8419	
Thu 31 July	Exhibition Opening Reception	Georgian Gallery	Ards Arts Centre	60	60	100.00%
2-31 August	Exhibition : At the Waters Edge	Gallery	Castle Espie			
1-30 Aug	Exhibition: Reflection	Georgian Gallery	Ards Arts Centre		1832	
1-30 Aug	Artist in Residence Lauren Ciara McCullough	Sunburst Gallery	Ards Arts Centre		1832	
1-30 Aug	Exhibiton: This Beautiful Place	Discovery Hub	Ards VIC		1302	
Fri 1 Aug	1:1 Pottery session	Tracey Johnston	Castle Espie	5	5	100.00%
Friday 1 August	Twilight Market and Arts Night	Conway Square	Ards Arts Centre		1220	
Sat 2 Aug	Woven in Time		Ulster Folk Museum	20	16	80.00%
Sun 3 Aug	Heritage Craft Afternoon	Courtyard	North Down Museum		220	
Tues 5 Aug	Capturing the Light Painting Workshop	Pandora Butterfield	Ards Arts Centre	17	17	100.00%

Tues 5 Aug	Wirework Jewellery Workshop	Morag Chamvbers	Ards Arts Centre	10	10	100.00%
Wed 6 Aug	Forest Sculpture Workshop	Ellen Cunningham	Ards Arts Centre	10	10	100.00%
Thur 7 Aug	Creative Cafe Plant Pot	Tracey Johnston	Castle Espie	12	12	100.00%
Thur 7 Aug	Mosaic Making Workshop	Geraldine Cooper	Ards Arts Centre	12	12	100.00%
Thur 7 Aug	Linoprinting Workshop	Rosie Ennis	Ards Arts Centre	10	9	90.00%
Creative Peninsula 2025			**Location**	**Capacity**	**Attendance**	**% sold**
Fri 8 Aug	Freedom of Painting Workshop	Maria Horvathova	Ards Arts Centre	8	3	37.50%
Sat 9 Aug	Open Studios	Sara Brown, Jane McCann, Kate Rebbeck, Anna Smyth, Joel Smyth	Own Studios			
Sun 10 Aug	Open Studios	Sara Brown, Kimberley Ladd, Jane McCann, Kate Rebbeck, Anna Smyth, Joel Smyth	Own Studios			
Sat 30 Aug	Silver Stacking Rings Workshop	Diane Lyness	Ards Arts Centre	10	10	100.00%
Total					**14989**	

Aspects Irish Literature Festival 2025

Date	Event	Venue	Capacity	Attendance	%
4 - 26 Sep	Blurring Seasons: An Exhibition by Pauline Little	Bangor Carnegie Library		300	
Thu 4 Sep	Blurring Seasons: Exhibition Launch	Bangor Carnegie Library	80	72	90%
Wed 24 Sep	Aspects Festival Club	Imperial Bar	70	67	95%
Thu 25 Sep	Late Night Art - Exhibition	Bangor Carnegie Library	50	35	70%
Thu 25 Sep	Late Night Art - Little Bangor Stories	Studio 1A	60	42	70%
Fri 26 Sep	Book launch: Flight from Prague	The Linen Hall, Belfast	110	110	100%
Fri 26 Sep	Flavours of Galicia: Poetry, Music and Taste	North Down Museum	50	50	100%
Sat 27 Sep	Ulster Scots Poetry Workshop with Anne McMaster	North Down Museum	10	10	100%
Sat 27 Sep	Lisa Harding: The Wildelings	SERC	50	40	80%

Sat 27 Sep	Aspects Poetry Slam	Studio 1A	100	45	45%
Sat 27 Sep	Both Sides: A Play by Jane Coyle	North Down Museum	61	61	100%
Sun 28 Sep	Dara McNulty: Wild Child book event in the Forest	Clandeboye Estate	50	50	100%
Sun 28 Sep	Xenia and Dara: Music, Readings & Nature	Studio 1A	100	95	95%
Mon 29 Sep	Book Binding Workshop	North Down Museum	10	10	100%
Date	**Event**	**Venue**	**Capacity**	**Attendance**	**%**
Tue 30 Sep	The Inkwell Journal Live	SERC	60	55	91%
Wed 1 Oct	Aspects Book Club with Nuala McKeever	Bangor Castle	45	29	64%
Thu 2 Oct	Pure Gold: Eamon Carr/Neil Martin	Bangor Castle	100	54	54%
Fri 3 Oct	Glenn Patterson; The Northern Bank Job	Bangor Castle	100	100	100%
Fri 3 Oct	David Trimble: Peacemaker Stephen Walker/Lady Hermon	Bangor Abbey	250	210	84%
Sat 4 Oct	Art of Storytelling with Carol Drinkwater	North Down Museum	12	12	100%
Sat 4 Oct	Bangor Abbey Graveyard Tour	Bangor Abbey	25	25	100%
Sat 4 Oct	Seán Farrell: Frogs for Watchdogs	Bangor Castle	50	28	56%
Sat 4 Oct	Carol Drinkwater: One Summer in Provence	Bangor Castle	100	100	100%
Sun 5 Oct	Poetry Competition & Bangor Journal launch	Bangor Castle	100	100	100%
Sun 5 Oct	Michael Longley Remembered	Bangor Castle	105	105	100%
				1829	

Young Aspects Festival 2026

Arts Annual Report 2025-26 **Appendix 1a**

Date	Event	Venue	Capacity	Attendance		% sold
Fri 27 Feb	Bookbinding	North Down Museum	10	6	60%	88.33%
Fri 27 Feb	Cosy Bedtime Stories	Bangor Castle	15	15	100%	98.00%
Fri 27 Feb	Tablets and Text	Boom Studios	10	9	90%	41.33%
Fri 27 Feb	Messy Mornings with Books	Boom Studios	15	10	66%	100.00%
Date	**Event**	**Venue**	**Capacity**	**Attendance**	**%**	**Date Event**
Fri 27 Feb	Character Creations	Bangor Carnegie Library	15	4	26%	100.00%
Fri 27 Feb	Children's Writing Workshop	North Down Museum	12	12	100%	100.00%
Sat 28 Feb	Book Clinics with Children's Books Ireland	Bangor Carnegie Library	20	20	100%	100.00%
Sat 28 Feb	Children's Writing Workshop	North Down Museum	10	6	60%	97.33%
Sat 28 Feb	Indoor Sketch Walk	Bangor Carnegie Library	8	7	87%	100.00%
Sat 28 Feb	Comic Creators	Bangor Carnegie Library	12	12	100%	91.67%
Sun 1 Mar	Chew and Yarn with Nature Rangers	Clandeboye Estate	45	45	100%	100.00%
Sun 1 Mar	Writing Workshop for Teenagers	Clandeboye Estate			cancelled	100.00%
	Puppet Workshops	Various	Studio	100	100	100.00%
	Punch and Judy x 2	Professor Queen Bee	Georgian Gallery	100	100	100.00%

	The Flea Circus x 6	Pignut Productions	Room 1	100	100	100.00%
					1609	

Leid AND Lairn Autumn 2025						
Date	**Event**	**Genre**	**Location**	**Capacity**	**Attendance**	**% sold**
Wed 5 Nov	Tru - Music	Trad Music	Bangor Castle	100	71	71.00%
Fri 7 Nov	A Bite an a Blether	Language Talk	Ards VIC	20	7	35.00%
Fri 14 Nov	Lisa Dawson - The Way Between	Piano	Ards Arts Centre	70	35	50.00%
Thurs 25 Nov	Ulster-Scots Pioneers	Talk	North Down Museum	60	60	100.00%
Nov	Cariboo Goldrush Exhibition	Exhibition	North Down Museum		17,551*	
23 Nov 11am	Valhalla Walking Tour- Ards	Walking Tour	Newtownards	20	4	20.00%
23 Nov 2pm	Valhalla Walking Tour- Ards	Walking Tour	Newtownards	20	9	45.00%
	* recorded footfall to ND Museum that month					
Delivered by Good	Primary School Education - 5 to Ulster Folk Museum	Education	Folk Museum			
Relations	Rabbie Burns Schools Education	Education			240	
	Ulster-Scots Agency Visit - 4 Schools	Education			200	

	Community Summer Schemes x 6 USA talks	Talk				
	Seniors Ceilidh - Ballywalter Village Hall	Dance			30	
	Ulster-Scots Tea Party with Decorum NI	Tea Party				
Delivered by NMNI						
Sat 25 Oct	The Last Folk Bard of Ulster - Joshua Burnside	Music/Poetry	Folk Museum	120	105	87.50%
Sat 1 Nov	Thistle Embroidery Workshop	Textiles	Folk Museum	8	8	100.00%
1 Nov-14-Nov	Five Fables Screenings	Film/Storytelling	Folk Museum		120	
					889	**TOTAL**

Arts and Heritage Panel Membership 2025-26

Chair	Cllr Richard Smart (Sept 2025-Sept 2026)
Vice-Chair	Linda Wilson (Sept 2025 – Sept 2026)
Chair	Catherine Charley (Sept 2024 – Sept 2025)
Vice-Chair	Cllr Alex Harbinson (Sept 2024 – Sept 2025)

Elected Members June 2024- June 2025 and June 2025-2026

Cllr Pete Wray
Cllr. Colin Kennedy
Cllr. Richard Smart
Cllr Alex Harbinson
Cllr Eddie Thompson (replaced Cllr MacArthur in June 2024)

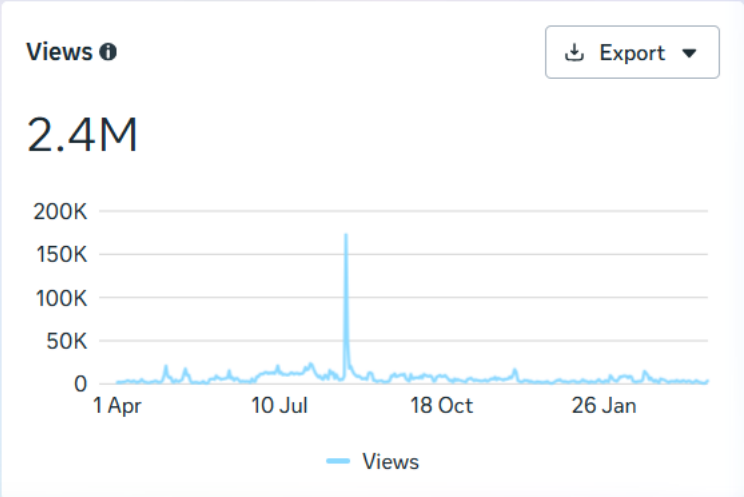
Voluntary Members April 2025 – Present

Museum/Heritage	Billy Carlisle	
Museum/Heritage	Stuart Alexander	
Museum/Heritage	Linda Wilson	
Visual Arts/Crafts	Gail Prentice	(Sept 2025 - present)
Visual Arts/Crafts	Jane McCann	

Visual Arts/Crafts	Anna Smyth	
Visual Arts/Crafts	Dympna Curran	
Literature	Catherine Charley	
Performance	Eve Williams	
Performance	Gregory Fox	
Community Arts	Jenny Kirkwood	(Sept 2025-present)
Community Arts	Marcus Hunter-Neill	

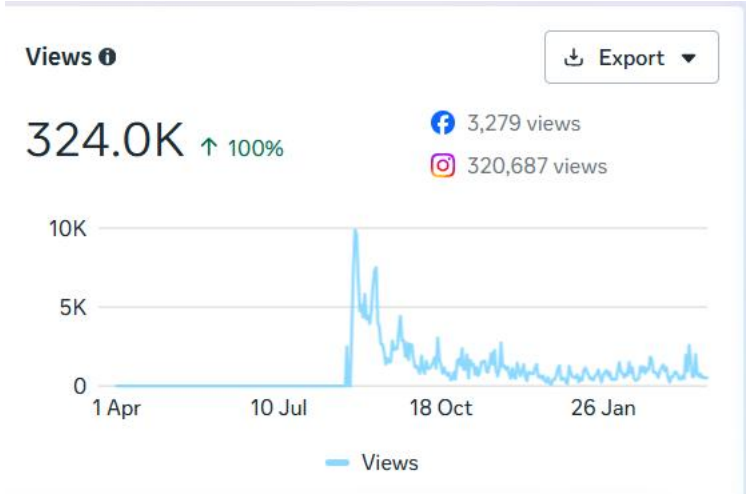
Culture Ards and North Down Social Media Performance

Facebook Views (1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026)



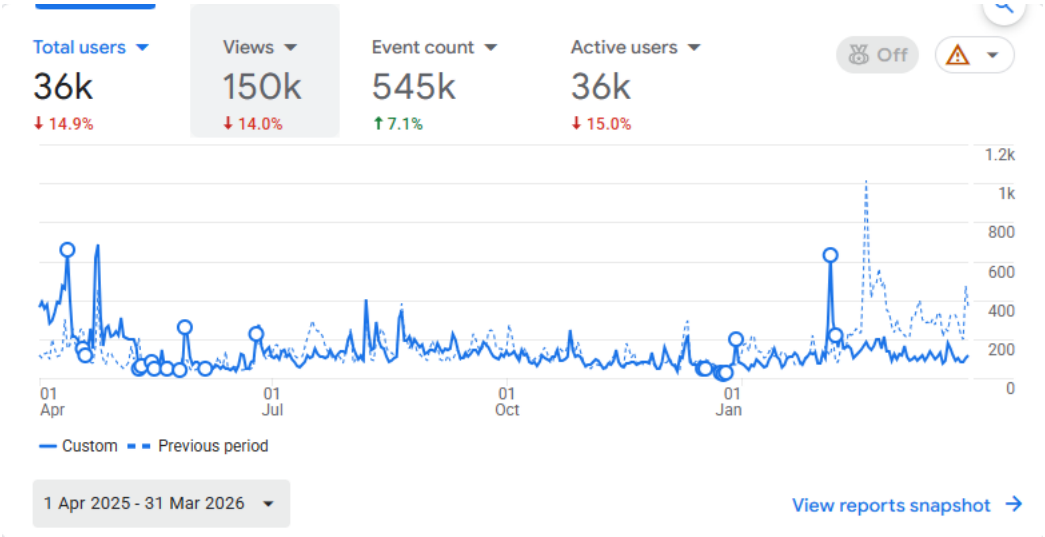
Facebook content generated **2.4M views** during the reporting period.

Instagram Views (1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026)



Instagram content recorded **324.0K views**, representing a **100% increase**.

ANDCulture Website Stats 1 April 2025– 31 March 2026 (G4 Analytics):



Website analytics for the period **1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026** recorded **36K total users**, **150K views**, **545K event count**, and **36K active users**.

Note: Any reduction in website traffic should be considered within the context of changing online search behaviours, with more users accessing information through AI-generated search results and summaries rather than visiting websites directly.

Ards and North Down Borough Council



Heritage/Museum
Annual Summary
April 2025-March 2026

NORTH DOWN MUSEUM AND HERITAGE SERVICE OVERVIEW

Ards and North Down Borough Council's North Down Museum and Heritage Service is responsible for the curation of the museum's collection of historic artefacts and works of art. In addition, it provides exhibitions, education and outreach programmes, grant aid, historic information and advice and the provision of North Down Museum, as well as partnership work with Council and Government departments and local communities/heritage interest groups to protect, preserve and share our Borough's rich history.

The annual operating budget for 2025/26 was **£345,000.**

NORTH DOWN MUSEUM VISITOR FIGURES

This year the museum has seen steady visitor figures, reaching **66,958 visitors** in the 2025-26 period. Currently, the museum captures this data manually by the member of staff at reception. This is not ideal as visitors may not be captured during busier periods. Other methods are being explored by management.

STAFF, VOLUNTEERS & WORK EXPERIENCE

Staffing levels remained the same as the previous year. However, in July the museum assistant casual cover ended as the staff member returned from a lengthy secondment to their substantive post.

The museum's two dedicated volunteers continued to work on documenting the museum's large image collection and cataloguing the library's books. We continue to accommodate a local historian with a space to research the history of 18th Century Bangor.

COLLECTIONS

Following an audit of the stores and galleries in 2023, several issues were identified, some of these issues were addressed in changes made in 2024 and 2025. However, the progress was slow due to the absence of a dedicated collections role in the museum and limited financial resources. The increase in historic information requests, motions of notice and busy programming schedule have left the museum manager with less time to dedicate to addressing collections management issues. However, some progress was made in the 2025/26 period and is summarized below.

1. Display Cases- a review took place on the current suitability of museum cases with regard to their security, accessibility, and long-term conservation suitability. A list will be drawn up to prioritise replacement of unsuitable cases, and funding options will be accessed.
2. Following the donation of the Percy French Collection, auditing, condition reports, accessing, numbering, labelling, packaging and scanning of the collection is still underway. All paper documents (800+) are being scanned as part of the accessioning process to improve accessibility of this collection while reducing physical damage. This is a time-consuming process, and it was not possible to complete it by the end of the financial year.

3. Following a loans renewal inspection from NMNI and NMI, both institutions have agreed to continue their loan agreements the the museum. The improvements to our environmental conditions have helped to secure the continuation of our loans from other accredited institutions.

4. The CCTV system in the museum was improved internally with a new modern system installed and cameras repositioned to increase coverage. This year the courtyard/gate and external areas of the museum and the carpark were upgraded. This includes the installation of cameras in new locations to ensure better coverage for the security of the museum's collection, staff, and visitors.

5. The art collection has been subject to an audit. It has revealed that there needs to be improvements in the quality of our art collection as most of collection does not meet the current collection development policy requirements. Much of the works are poor quality amateur works or works with no connection to the borough. Work was ongoing in 2024 and 2025 to make connections with potential donors and build positive relationships with art collectors in Northern Ireland. As a result of this the museum has received a donation from the Middleton family (see acquisitions section for details).

6. In response to the lack of accessibility to art in Bangor Castle, a virtual tour of the Craig Room has been completed. The Craig room is also receiving new labels and interpretation.

7. As part of the results of the art collection audit several painting that were damaged as a result of a burst pipe in 2022, have been reviewed and conservation and reframing have been carried out.

8. Following the purchase and installation of a new case and mount for our permanent Bronze Age gallery, the Ballycroghan swords are now back on public display. The new case has vastly improved the long-term preservation of these key artefacts in the museum's collection.

9. A new small artefact storage unit was purchased and installed to help improve the condition of the vulnerable objects in the store. This purchase will help to protect fragile items from physical damage, improve their environmental conditions and improve their security. Other secure storage units need to be purchased to improve the management of the collection as funds become available.

Acquisitions

On 5th June 2025 the museum received a prestigious donation of sketches and photographs of the artist Colin Middleton. The donation is worth over £23,000 and was donated by Jane, his daughter. This donation was made possible through the relationships created during the curation of our Inspiration and Transformation exhibition. The creation of new partnerships with art holders will help to improve our access to high level artworks and make that art accessible for free to our visitors. Long term, the aim is to enrich the art collection with high-quality works that have a strong connection to the borough.

Enquiries

Collection and history-based enquiries have once again increased in this period with approximately 460 enquiries resolved. These requests include advice, historic information, supervised access to collection, and help with research. Requests came from organisations, academic researchers, individuals, local community groups, and students. All required action and some required a substantial percentage of staff time.

EXHIBITION PROGRAMME

Exhibition details can be found in appendices

The museum continues to provide a rolling programme of exhibitions in our temporary exhibition spaces. In 2024, the temporary galleries were each given a distinct and different identity with exhibition lengths increased and standardised across all galleries. This helped with the programming as it allowed each space to have a clear function and purpose, meeting the needs of different audiences, and more effectively achieving the museum's aims. It has also resulted in each exhibitor being given a longer slot which has proved successful as this allows more time to be put into the production and marketing of the exhibitions, which allows us to raise their profile. It also allows visitors to have a better opportunity to experience them, which was addressing feedback from members of the public who felt the periods of display were short and inconsistent.

Additionally, all exhibitions are curated or co-curated by museum staff rather than leaving the curation solely to individuals and communities. This ensures that each exhibition has been correctly and securely mounted in accordance with museum standards and that the text has been edited to make it accurate, accessible, and appealing to a wide audience. Amending our programming in this way has prevented clashing exhibition dates and themes and has allowed for greater forward planning. It has allowed for better strategic planning and for the integration of exhibition themes into our education and family programming, which has resulted in better programming cohesion and an elevation in the quality of our programming.

Long Gallery

This gallery is the focus of the museums' temporary exhibition programme and explores themes within art and history, often using the museum's collection. These exhibitions are curated by the museum manager, sometimes in partnership with local groups and artists. Improvements to the security and environmental conditions ensure that this space can facilitate the appropriate display of the museum collection and meet the exacting requirements of high-profile accredited lending institutions and private collectors. Long term this will improve the quality of the exhibitions to attract a more diverse audience and to appeal to residents as well as visiting tourists.

Community Gallery

The Community Gallery is open to local groups and individuals who wish to highlight their collections or historic stories by creating an exhibition. Communities can contact the museum's Heritage Development Officer (HDO) to apply to use this gallery, but exhibitions often come through projects developed by the museum's HDO or from projects funded by our Heritage grants. Each applicant has the museum's HDO to co-curate with them to ensure the end result is of museum standard.

Cafe Gallery

This space was assessed to be best suited to display artworks exclusively. The exhibitions can be from both professional and amateur artists/photographers and offer them the opportunity for sales in a busy cafe environment. The opportunity to have an exhibition in this space is externally advertised and assessed by a panel against a set of criteria. Consideration is given to the content of the other galleries to ensure diversity of themes and topics.

Made in AND: Pop-Up Christmas Shop

The Museum's Long Gallery hosted the annual Made in AND: Pop-Up Christmas Shop from November to January. This shopping experience is designed to support local small arts and craft-based businesses in the borough. The museum had held a two-day Christmas market in the past, but the shop has received much more positive feedback from businesses as it is over a longer time and doesn't require the seller to be present. The museum manages display, marketing, and sales and provides the seller with payment at the end of the period. The offering of the shop is carefully curated to represent a myriad of skilled makers and a variety of beautiful hand-made products to suit all budgets. The 2025/26 shop featured products from 32 small local artists and makers. This unique shopping experience is launched with a late-night shopping event where selected makers are invited to demonstrate their skills and highlight and promote their business. It has proved to be popular with visitors to the Museum and netted £9123.17 in the sale of artist work during this period (2nd Nov-4th January 25/26).

Exhibition Highlights

Exhibitions are used as a way to educate and inform the public, but they can also be used to create new relationships with our community and with other institutions. Here are three examples from the 19 exhibitions that highlight how exhibitions form and strengthen those relationships. For details on other exhibitions held see appendix1.

The 'Inspiration and Transformation' art exhibition was designed to allow the public to view rarely seen valuable artworks held in private ownership. In addition, it was hoped that we could foster positive relationships with local art collectors who were amenable to becoming lenders and even possibly future donors to help to enrich the museums art collection. From the curation of this exhibition, positive relationships were created and collectors loaned the museum very valuable artworks at no cost. A relationship was formed with Colin Middleton's daughter Jane who agreed to loan the museum several pieces of artwork by her father and brother. During this process, Jane decided to donate a collection of Colin Middleton sketches for the museum's collection (see acquisitions).

The History Detectives Exhibition allowed the museum to work with a local group who had published a history book, to curate an exhibition which acted as a mechanism of community engagement and to create connections with high profile accredited institutions. The exhibition highlighted the resources available to the public and what exciting history could be discovered, encouraging people to become history detectives themselves. As part of this a public talk/workshop was given to anyone interested in getting involved in doing their own research with speakers giving practical advice and examples of how this could be achieved. As part of the curation of the exhibition, rarely seen artefacts of historic significance were loaned to the

museum by the Public Records Office and National Museum NI, includes the original patent of 1622 elevating James Hamilton to Viscount Clandeboye. This stunning artefact had never before been seen outside of PRONI.

Building Boats at Ballyholme developed from conversations within the Heritage Cluster and led to contact with a former Northern Ireland correspondent for Afloat magazine, who had worked at the boatyard. Through this collaboration, private photographic collections and archives were accessed, and interviews were carried out with the boatyard's last owner and four former employees from the 1970s and 1980s. This exhibition demonstrates the value of working with local historians and community groups to explore this industrial history of the area. It also highlights the significance of this trade in a coastal borough.

Artists Sales

Sales from artists' work from our galleries came to a total of £17,265.33 of which we generate 20% commission. This is significantly lower than commercial galleries but allows the museum to accrue a small income which we can use to contribute our programming.

EVENTS

In addition to exhibitions, the museum also offers talks, tours, workshops and other activities on a variety of topics to engage with a broad age range, see appendices 2-4.

Talks

The museum now offers a series of evening heritage talks on a range of historic subjects relating to the heritage of the borough. These allow the museum to facilitate access to specialist speakers, inform the public on recent discoveries and new research findings, and to test public interest in topics for consideration for larger projects. In addition, the museum offers outreach talks developed in-house relating to our collection and local history.

Classes & Workshops

The museum runs workshops for adults and children that are history and craft based. This allows the museum to engage with different groups of adults in exploring their creativity and allows us to host fun events for children that have an element of heritage. These events are modified each year to allow for repeat family visits for borough residents.

Tours

The museum also offers tours of the museum to visiting groups however, this activity is significantly restricted as the upstairs areas of the museum must be closed to facilitate school visits and family-friendly programming.

Events for Children & Families

Our Education and Outreach Officer's role was increased to full time in 2024. From this, not only have we seen an increase in school visits, but our offering for children and families has also expanded.

During key holiday periods, the museum offers the following:

Easter:

* *Little Historians* 3-day workshop for children aged 7-11 (drop-off event).

* Easter Trail is held every Easter Monday and Tuesday

Summer:

* Music and movement events for children aged 6 and under and their adults.

* Drop-off events for children aged 7-12.

Halloween:

* *Not-So-Scary Halloween* for children aged 3-11 and their adults, involving craft workshops and music and movement events.

Christmas:

* Music and movement events for children aged 6 and under and their adults.

* *Made in AND: Handmade Holiday Magic* – craft workshops for children aged 7-11(drop-off event).

Through this continuous offering, parents are learning that the museum provides events and activities suitable for all their children at set points throughout the year, and we have seen repeat visitors at each of our children's events.

As relationships between the museum and schools/nurseries have been strengthened through our education programming, advertising these events has become easier as we can now target specific age groups with the assistance of local schools. The events are also advertised in our Little Historians gallery, which is often frequented by our target audiences.

A few changes were made to our children's events programming in 2025/26:

Little Historians Workshops

In 2024/25, many schools had different Easter holidays which caused issues with ticket sales. So, to ensure tickets were available for all, this year's workshops were held during the Easter week (the three days after Easter Monday and Tuesday) to coincide with all school holidays. The workshops were sold out.

The decision to link the theme of this year's Little Historians workshops (80th anniversary of VE Day) with other museum activities meant this wasn't a standalone event, which helped with the promotion of the workshops. Research and resources were also able to be shared. Additionally, if parents engaged with a particular museum workshop, talk or exhibition, there was also an activity that their child could engage with. We plan to do this each year (when possible) with our Little Historians workshops.

Not-So-Scary Halloween

Previously we held Halloween events for children in separate age brackets. After feedback from previous events, this year we asked facilitators to provide workshops that would be suitable for children aged 3-11 so that all members of the family could attend. Upon these changes, we noticed that tickets sold more quickly.

We also asked our craft facilitators to create an intergenerational workshop where both children and their parents/grandparents could create a piece of art alongside each other. The reason for this was not solely because of the benefits of intergenerational activity (improved cognitive and emotional health, development of empathy and social skills etc.) but also to make better use of the space, meaning every seat was filled.

The idea for our intergenerational workshops came from feedback received in 2024 after the success of our children's D-Day education packs. Many families told us that children and their grandparents enjoyed completing the activities together. However, in almost one third of our Halloween bookings, adults did not wish to purchase a ticket to create their own piece of art. If we decide to run a workshop like this again, we will ensure the wording and imagery used is clearer.

Made in AND: Handmade Holiday Magic

In 2024/25, we only sold 50% of the available tickets for our Christmas craft workshops. On reflection, we realised that the timings of these workshops did not suit most families. As they take place on a Saturday, most children aged 7-11 are involved in events for clubs/teams in the morning, so our morning workshops did not sell. In 2025/26, we moved the workshops to the afternoon and both workshops sold out. We will plan for these timings again in 2026/27.

80th Anniversary of VE Day Event

The museum carried out a series of events and activities to mark the 80th anniversary of VE Day. This began with a series of reminiscence sessions in residential homes in the Borough to engage and collect stories and memories to make up part of the 'VE Day Recollections' exhibition in the community gallery. Our Little Historians programme at the end of April was themed around WW2 which featured the children engaging with a 90-year-old evacuee from Belfast who lived through the blitz and was evacuated in 1941. The children were captivated by her wartime stories and her tales of what it was like to be a child in the 1940's.

In addition, the museum held a talk exploring the role of the ARP during the war by Heritage defence expert Dr James O'Neill, shared his research into the period and how Bangor and Newtownards were affected by air strikes. It was an added bonus for attendees to share their family stories about life in the war and recount the experience of family members who were ARP wardens in Bangor and Belfast. Afterwards attendees were invited to stay for the beacon lighting at Bangor Castle. Lastly, the museum held a VE Day living history event where Valhalla Street theatre brought characters from the war to life including ARP wardens, nurses, land girls, teachers and soldiers.

Field of Change Heritage Conference

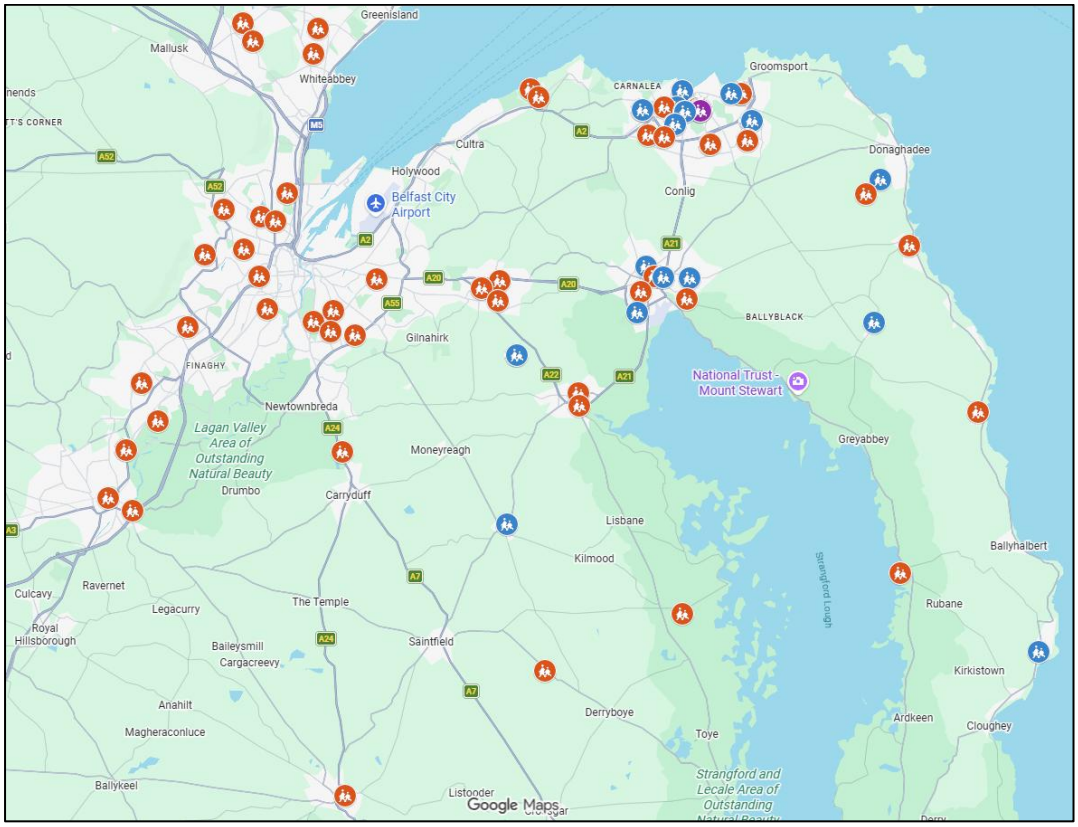
North Down Museum hosted their second one-day conference on Thursday 30 October 2025 at Bangor Castle, this time focusing on farming, land and rural heritage in the Borough of Ards and North Down. The event explored the Borough's farming traditions and evolving landscapes, offering insights into how agricultural practices and landholding patterns have shaped its cultural and physical character over the centuries. Staff received positive feedback from all 58 attendees, praising the quality of the speakers and presentations, as well as the organisation of the event.

EDUCATION PROGRAMME

There continues to be a high demand for education visits at the museum. Post-covid, surveys were completed by schools and results showed that our Vikings programme was the most requested. Second to this, our Early Christian programme. Therefore, these programmes continue to be offered to schools. Both programmes are aligned to *The World Around Us* area of learning within the Northern Ireland Curriculum, focusing on the development of knowledge, skills and understanding in history.

School Visits

In 2025/26 our education provision increased by 39% as we provided 97 education programmes to 52 schools and 18 nurseries with 3,319 pupils and staff engaging in Vikings, Early Christian Heritage, and early years education programmes. This map shows the spread of schools that visited/were visited by the museum in 2025/26. See Appendix 5 for details of all school visits.



Red = primary schools Blue = nursery schools

Primary Schools

In 2025/26 we hosted 74 visits from 52 schools with a total of 2,759 pupils and staff/parents attending.

The majority of schools who book with us continue to come from the Bangor and Newtownards areas.

We continue to email all primary schools within a 30-mile radius of the museum 4 times per year to highlight our education service. In 2025/26, 13 new schools booked our Vikings programme, including schools from Ballynahinch, Lisburn and Monkstown. These 13 new schools brought a total of 503 children and 68 adults to the museum.

Feedback from schools continues to be overwhelmingly positive. Castle Gardens PS, Newtownards, who are repeat visitors to our Vikings programme, gave the following feedback after their visit in January 2026:

“An outstanding level of planning has gone into our visit with written information supplied. The Discovery Room activities are excellent as they engage the children and offer both ‘discovery’ and application of reasoning/maths/literacy skills. The Viking longhouse session is an outstanding experience and the Viking re-enactor's knowledge and enthusiasm are brilliant. It’s great to have a hands-on element. The craft session is superbly resourced and organised. There is nothing to improve upon in this Vikings trip – every little detail has been planned meticulously. We would like to book immediately for next year.”

Issues continue to be:

Cost of transport – teachers continue to mention the rising cost of transport. We have been told that our programme costs are reasonable and good value for money (£3 per child for Early Christian and £4 per child for Vikings), but transport costs are making out-of-school trips more difficult. Although this has not impacted our programming, we are listening to schools and keeping an eye on the situation. Schools are made aware that we can offer an in-school visit with a pared-down version of our programmes. However, most schools see the benefit of bringing their classes to the museum to see our Viking longhouse and monk’s cell reconstructions – an experience than cannot be replicated in school.

Timings – many schools reduce costs by using the Education Authority buses. However, drop-off and pick-up times are dictated by the Local Authority as they have other journey commitments. Therefore, some school visits are incredibly rushed, and teachers are not given timings in advance, so we are unable to prepare for these shorter visits.

Accessibility – our Lecture Room (for craft and lunch) can only be accessed via a stairwell. This requires other areas to be cleaned and reset mid-visit, which is only possible with groups under 30 children.

Space – the lunch space is often too cramped for the number of children attending and we cannot stagger lunches due to the same space also being used for crafts (96% of schools request a lunch space).

Nursery Schools

We delivered 23 new early years workshops to 18 nursery schools with a total of 560 children and staff involved.

After 3 years of delivering school programmes post-covid, a significant drop in bookings was identified each year during the final summer term. This is particularly noticeable among Primary 6 classes, one of the museum's key audiences, as many schools focus on preparation for the (SEAG) transfer test during this period. The final term is also an exceptionally busy time for schools, with sports days, school productions and other end-of-year activities competing for time.

Previous involvement with nursery settings through NIMC's *Playful Museums Festival* highlighted a strong appetite for museum engagement within the early years sector. In response to this, a new programme, *Terrific Toys*, was developed to support the early years curriculum while introducing children to toys from the past and exploring how toys have changed over time.

The programme was offered free of charge to early years establishments across the borough, with all available sessions booked immediately. Feedback from practitioners was extremely positive. Several commented that they had not known what to expect from a museum visit and had previously assumed that museum activities would be based around a "look but don't touch" approach. They particularly valued the hands-on nature of the sessions, which gave children the opportunity to freely explore and play with the toys.

Of the 18 nurseries involved, four visited the museum, as they were within walking distance. Outreach sessions were delivered to the remaining 14 nurseries in their own settings, as transport costs can be prohibitive for a one-hour session. This approach significantly increased accessibility and enabled the programme to reach a wider range of early years settings.

The success of the first year of our Terrific Toys programme has demonstrated a clear demand for museum engagement within the early years sector. Several nurseries have already enquired about booking future sessions, highlighting the potential for developing this area of programming further. The project has also reinforced the value of creating programmes specifically for younger audiences and of taking museum handling collections and expertise directly into nursery settings where visiting the museum may otherwise be difficult.

Our Museum Book Project

Following our selection by NIMC to create a storybook about the museum for early years audiences, the new book was launched. Children from Bright Sparks Montessori Preschool, who co-created the storybook, were invited to the museum to take part in a child-friendly tour and music and movement session. Each child was presented a copy of the book in front of their parents.

Building on the success of the first year of *Terrific Toys*, and adding value to the storybook project, four new one-hour workshops have been developed for nursery settings.

Each workshop is based on *Max's Magical Visit to the Museum* using the story as a starting point to introduce children to different aspects of the museum's collections and local history. The sessions combine storytelling, hands-on exploration, movement, music and creative activities, providing an engaging and age-appropriate way for young children to discover the past. The programme further strengthens the museum's commitment to meaningful early years engagement. To be rolled out in 2026/27.

Playful Museums Festival

The museum was successful in its application to the *Playful Museums Festival* grant, receiving £500 to support the development of early years' programming. The funding was used to engage experienced early years practitioner Kelsey Carroll of Squiggles and Giggles, who worked alongside the museum to develop a series of workshops based on Max's Magical Visit to the Museum. Four one-hour workshop plans were created, each including a detailed list of required resources. Additional funding was subsequently provided by NIMC through the *Our Museum* book project to purchase the resources needed to deliver the sessions.

The workshops were initially piloted with children at Bright Sparks Montessori Preschool, who had been involved in the original development of the storybook. Feedback was gathered from both practitioners and children, providing valuable insight into the content, activities, and suitability of each session. The workshops were then refined and adapted in response before being offered to other nursery settings across the borough. The approach ensured that the final programmes were informed by both professional early years' expertise and the experiences of the children themselves.

FUNDED PROJECTS

Historic Environment Fund

A funding application was successfully submitted to HED's Historic Environment Fund for new interpretation, signage and repair works at Bully's Acre, Newtownards. In addition, as an in-kind contribution, the Parks and Cemeteries team would provide ongoing vegetation maintenance of the site, and the Museum co-produced a touring exhibition with Ards Historical Society in advance of the funding application.

Unfortunately, due to works elsewhere being deemed vital, the repair works at Bully's Acre were not undertaken within the funding timeframe. However, it was decided that the works, interpretation, etc., outlined above, could be paid from the Parks & Cemetery budget.

The new interpretation panels were co-produced with Ards Historical Society and are expected to be installed later this year. The touring exhibition was on show in Ards Visitor Centre in October 2025 and will be displayed in the Museum's Community Gallery from 3 November to 31 January 2027.

Handling Collection and Loan Boxes

In 2025, the museum received £5,300 from the Northern Ireland Museums Council's 'Local Museum Small Grant Programme' for *Beyond the Box: Optimising Outreach through Handling Collections*.

The project reviewed and improved the museum's handling collection to make loan boxes more engaging, accessible and easier to use. It expanded the number of boxes and handling objects available for schools, care homes, SEN groups and community talks, and strengthened understanding, discussion and connections with local heritage. Feedback from the trial groups showed the revised resources were easier to use and better supported learning and participation.

The newly revised loan boxes will be rolled out to schools and community groups in 2026/27.

OUTREACH, COLLABORATION & SUPPORT

Outreach

In 2025-26 the museum's outreach programme provided 9 historic talks, 5 SEN programmes, 9 reminiscence sessions and 3 heritage walks. The museum also took part in St Comgall's Day family event at Bangor Abbey (see Appendix 6).

Outreach engaged with a total of 698 persons plus one event (St Comgall's Day) with 100+ attendees.

The museum's outreach programme is available throughout the year and can be arranged to suit each group's meeting time, whether in the morning, afternoon or evening. In addition, the museum has a selection of themed handling boxes, containing original and replica artefacts, which are used to enhance talks and are available for loan to schools and groups.

Talks are tailored to the requirements of each group and can be delivered as formal historical presentations, e.g. for historical societies and Probus groups, or as more general-interest local history talks for non-heritage interest groups. We also offer dementia-friendly reminiscence sessions and talks for care homes, and an 8-week programme for SEN groups covering local heritage from prehistory to the 1950s.

The outreach programme is important because it allows museum staff to engage with a wider audience, reach people who are physically unable to visit the museum, and helps to ensure that the Museum service is accessible to all residents of the borough. All talks are free of charge.

Heritage Cluster

Established in 2022 and facilitated by the Heritage Development Officer, Ards and North Down Heritage Cluster brings together 24 voluntary heritage-interest groups from across the Borough. Its overall purpose is to strengthen connections between members and support a more coordinated approach to celebrating and sustaining local heritage.

Meeting quarterly, the cluster provides an open forum for discussion, promotes funding and training opportunities, supports networking and research-sharing, identifies training needs, strengthens partnership working across the Borough, and hosts informal talks from invited Council officers, government organisations, NGOs and funders. Meetings typically attracted 15 to 20 representatives, demonstrating sustained demand for the network and the value it provides to local heritage organisations.

The cluster met four times in 2025-6 with a total of 74 persons attending.

Adult SEN Programming

We have delivered an 8-part series of workshops to adults with learning disabilities through outreach since 2023. This allows relationships to be built over time, which in turn allows for a tailored learning experience. The programme runs on a fortnightly basis and takes 4 months to complete. In 2025/26, we delivered 29 workshops to 5 different groups of adults with SEN.

The programme has continued to develop based on the needs of the participants and so has the use of the handling collection in order to further engage the adults.

We are reliant upon groups that work with adults with learning disabilities to have their own premises, which not all do. There is obviously the option to run this programme from the museum, but the only available space is our Lecture Room which can only be accessed via a stairwell. Most of the adult groups we work with have participants with physical disabilities and therefore, would be unable to attend.

The project has encouraged learning about the past and its relevance today, built community links, fostered relationships and peer support, and increased social skills and self-confidence.

Sir Samuel Kelly Lifeboat

Museum staff continued to work closely with the Donaghadee Heritage Preservation Company to care for the Sir Samuel Kelly Lifeboat. Conservation of the boat has advanced significantly. Work externally is complete, and work on the engine room has also recently been completed. The group, who were successful (with council support) in their HLF bid, received £90,000 to advance the exhibition centre, improve outreach and exhibits and to employ a part-time member of staff. The group has managed to create a new attractive temporary exhibition space and has recruited new volunteers and completed their training. They have also begun work on creating programming for schools' groups and improving outreach. In addition, the group has created a relationship with the commissioners of Irish Lights who manage the Lighthouse in Donaghadee which may offer new opportunities for collaboration.

The council has acted as a partner in this project and has offered advice and guidance to the group. This has involved advice from museum staff on schools' programming, outreach, shop merchandising, exhibitions, and collecting feedback/survey data. Interpretation panels were designed and paid for by the museum to use in their exhibition room. The group is now coming to the end of their HLF grant support and is reviewing options for ensuring their sustainability long-term. The museum manager is supporting the group with this process.

The Somme Museum SLA

The Somme Museum is an institution for the study and interpretation of Ireland’s contribution to the First World War, with reference to the Battle of the Somme. The Museum opened in 1994 to commemorate the involvement of the 36th (Ulster) Division, 16th (Irish) Division and 10th (Irish) Divisions in the Battle of the Somme. It provides exhibitions, displays and information. Parties of schoolchildren as well as members of the public and their families visit it regularly and learn of the sacrifices made by others in the past for the freedom they enjoy today. Since 2000 the Museum has expanded into the Second World War and other modern international conflicts.

Historically the legacy Councils of Ards and North Down separately financially supported the Somme Museum and since their merge in 2015, Ards and North Down Borough Council (ANDBC) have continued to support the Museum and recognises the significant contribution

the Somme Association makes to the preservation of our local heritage and the provision of access to education to ensure this legacy is not forgotten.

In 2025/26 ANDBC agreed to increase the annual support from £10,000 to £18,000 per annum and put in place a Service Level Agreement for the delivery of Heritage Engagement Services to provide annual events and a school's education programme. 2025/26 proved a positive year for the Somme Museum with their Education Programme at capacity. 40 schools and 3250 children were welcomed along with an additional 267 through ANDBC's Good Relations Programme and 35 through specialist SEN promotion.

Three engagement events were delivered; Christmas in the Trenches with 100 participants, a German Archives Presentation by Jonathan Porter with 118 attendees and a presentation Transport No.4 by Mark Scott that had 16 attendees. Seven outreach visits were made to community/special interest groups.

In total the Somme Museum welcomed 4,589 visitors with 24% of those from the Ards and North Down Borough. Visitors from outside of Northern Ireland make up less than 2% of the Museum's overall visits, with visitors from the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, France, England and Australia, with the remainder N.I based. The Somme Museum received news in February 2026 from the Northern Ireland Museums Council that they have successfully retained full Museum Accreditation again for the next five years.

Interdepartmental Support in Council

Museum staff provide significant assistance and information to many other council departments including tourism, democratic services, parks, community and corporate services. This often has a significant impact on museum staff resources. This has included giving tours and walks for other departments, researching and creating interpretation panels for council sites and offering specialist advice regarding accurate information, artefacts curation and governance and the management of historic sites. Staff have also liaised with communities and other government bodies such as HED to aid other council staff and they sit as advisors and stakeholders in various groups including the Whitespots Greenway project, Ards TT centenary and the Strangford Lough and Lecale Partnership joint-council officer's stakeholder group.

HERITAGE GRANTS

Heritage Project Grants 2025-26

A new grant stream to support the heritage sector was identified as another key action in within the IAHDS. Introduced in 2018/19 the Heritage Project Grants provide practical support to community organisations working to research, record, interpret and share local heritage. From 2018-2026, the scheme has supported 56 grant awards to 25 organisations, with a total investment of £25,159 demonstrating both sustained demand and the value of relatively small-scale grants in enabling grassroots heritage activity (*see Appendix 7*).

The grant has helped organisations not only to preserve local heritage, but also to improve public access, increase participation and build their own capacity to deliver heritage activity in new and engaging ways and provide equity of geographic access across the borough. The Heritage Grant Programme has become an effective and visible mechanism for delivering a strategic commitment made in 2018, while helping to nurture a more active, resilient and locally rooted heritage sector.

Ten Heritage Grants were awarded in 2025-26. The grant budget was £5000, with a maximum of £500 per project, and the total spend was £4245.98. Ten groups successfully applied; of these, one group did not complete their project, and another spent significantly less on their project than anticipated.

Ulster Scots Talks Grant 2025-26

The Ulster-Scots Talks grant is available to constituted historical societies and heritage-interest groups seeking funding towards the costs of organising a publicly accessible Ulster-Scots heritage talk within the Ards and North Down Borough Council area. This grant was inherited from the Tourism team in 2020 and was intended to complement the talk programmes of historical groups by supporting talks that could be accessed free of charge by non-members. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the grant was not made available in 2020/21 but reopened in 2021/22 *(see Appendix 8*).

Since 2021, the scheme has supported 47 grant awards to 17 organisations, with a total investment of £4,457.45, demonstrating sustained demand and the value of relatively small-scale grants in enabling grassroots heritage activity.

Eight groups availed of the grant for 2025/26, with talks taking place between October 2025 and March 2026. The grant budget was £1,000, of which £704 was spent. In addition, grants were available for Ulster-Scots heritage events through the Leid and Lairn budget. The grant budget for events was £1,500, of which £1,342 was provided for events held by six groups.

From 2026/27, both Ulster-Scots grants will be combined into a single budget of £2,500. The maximum amount available will be £125 per group for a talk and £250 for an event, and groups will be able to apply for both a talk and an event.

BUILDING CHALLENGES

The castle building is a challenging environment for the museum. While the castle is aesthetically attractive, housing a modern museum in a 170-year-old building can be extremely challenging.

Water Ingress

It takes a significant amount of staff resources and to deal with the constant water ingress issues that plague the museum building. While there have been improvements in the humidity levels due to the introduction of more dehumidifiers, they require daily emptying and require significant electricity. The past two years have seen a significant increase in the frequency of storms and periods of intense rainfall. When this occurs water ingress is unavoidable and water leaks into the cafe, galleries, staffroom and stores. This has caused damage to walls, windows and floors. This has had a financial impact as water absorbent materials need to be

regularly purchased and galleries need repainting and wooden windows are deteriorating and requiring repair. This has also caused exhibited items to be removed. The worsening of this situation is making it incredibly difficult to maintain the required environmental conditions as an accredited institution and to look after our loans. The staffroom suffered a flood caused by the backup of the sewage pipe with rainwater. This resulted in contaminated water flooding the staffroom and stairs and has required daily absorbent pads to control to water ingress since. The outdated Victorian plumbing cannot cope with the current demands of this building, and it is a concern for staff in the 2026/27 period.

Accessibility & Space

The museum building is incredibly cramped and much of our programming has to be severely restricted in numbers due to space issues. Talks have to be held at night to use the cafe space or alternative venues sourced. It can be difficult for visitors with physical disabilities as some of our spaces are only accessible through stairs. Where possible lifts have been installed but some areas still remain difficult to access.

VISITOR DATA COLLECTION

The visitor survey is available in paper form in the museum and also online in a citizen space system; this is accessed via a QR code placed throughout the museum building. This supplies the museum with data regarding our visitors to assess our current programming and inform future planning and programming.

For the 25-26 period, data collected from the survey highlights some of the demographics trends of the museum's visitors. Of our adult visitors the largest age groups falls into the 55-64 age group, making up 19.27% of our visitors. This is a change from last year where our largest age group was the 65+ group. We have also seen significant change in the percentage of young adult visitors with a rise of 11%. The 16-24 age group now accounts for 17.72% of our surveyed visitors. While females habitually make up the largest percentage of our visitors, this percentage has risen slightly with females making up 61% of our visitors. The reason for these demographic changes could be as a result of the new Little Historian's gallery and changes in the diversity of programming to attract a broader range of visitors.

We have also seen changes in the home location of our visitors. The majority of our visitors are from the UK (64.58%), of this 33.68% are from the borough (a significant rise from last year). We have also seen a rise in NI visitors and a decrease in (non-NI) UK visitors. We have also seen a small rise in European visitors and a small drop in US visitors. In the other category, visitors were recorded from Canada, Australia, New Zealand and India.

The last section of the survey revealed that 98.44% of visitors rated the experience at the museum as excellent or good with 89% falling into the excellent category. The section relating to where the visitor has heard about the museum revealed that the majority of people learned of the museum from word of mouth. In a shift from last year, people appear to hear about the museum from word-of-mouth personal recommendations and social media rather than the website or traditional media methods. This is expected as this trend can be observed across the board with increased public use of social media platforms. The survey also includes a section to record visitor's comments which were overwhelmingly positive. The most frequent comments cited the friendly and informed staff, quality of exhibitions, and child-friendly initiatives. There were only a couple of negative comments, and they were focused on the the car park and the difficulty of finding space. The detail of this data is listed in Appendix 9.

MARKETING & DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

The Arts and Heritage Service continued to benefit from a strong social media presence during this time-period, with 7.8K followers on the Culture Ards and North Down Facebook page, an additional 2.8K followers on the Guitar Festival Facebook page, and 4K followers on Instagram. Collectively, the Culture social media channels increased their audience by 2.4K followers compared to the previous year.

Between 1 April 2025 and 31 March 2026, the ANDculture website attracted 36K active users and recorded 150K page views. The website's *What's On* page accounted for 11.1K page views during this period.

Mailing List

The combined Arts and Heritage ANDculture mailing list currently includes over 5.1K subscribers, segmented across a range of audience groups. A monthly *What's On* e-newsletter is distributed to 3.2K subscribers, highlighting upcoming activity across the Arts and Heritage Service. The newsletter achieved an average open rate of 57% during the reporting period.

Top Performing Social Media Posts by Reach

The highest-performing organic Museum posts during 2025/26, based on organic reach, were:

- History Detectives Exhibition (Facebook, 31/08/25) – 8.8K
- The bees are back at North Down Museum (Facebook, 09/07/25 – 8.2K
- Building Boats at Ballyholme Exhibition (Facebook, 30/01/25) – 7.5K
- Bangor Horticultural Society Talk, image of speakers (Facebook, 13/06/25) – 6.2K
- Full House at Dickon Hall Inspirations and Transformation Exhibition Art Talk (Facebook, 07/07/25) – 4.8K
- Spooktacular Fun, Halloween Workshops (Facebook, 03/10/25) – 4.7K
- Between Worlds Exhibition (Facebook, 30/11/25) – 4.4K

Culture Ards and North Down Social Media Performance

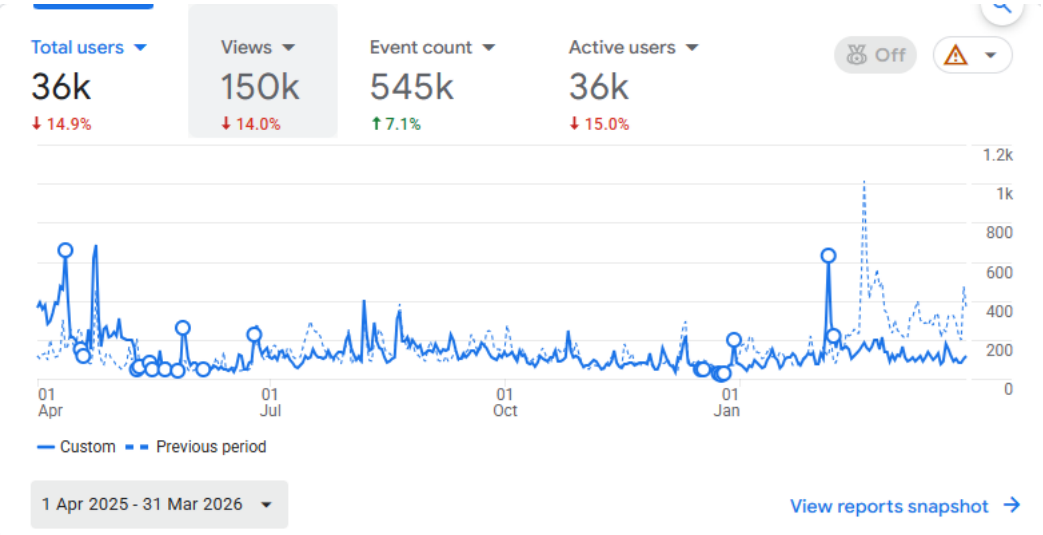
Culture Ards and North Down Facebook (1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026)

- **Facebook Views:** Facebook content generated **2.4M views** during the reporting period.
- **Facebook Interactions:** Facebook content received **19.3K interactions**, an increase of **108.8%**.
- **Facebook visits:** The Culture Ards and North Down Facebook page recorded **27.5K visits**, an increase of **68.3%**.

Culture Ards and North Down Instagram (1 April 25 – 31 March 26)

- **Instagram Views:** Instagram content recorded **324.0K views**, representing a **100% increase**.
- **Instagram Interactions:** Instagram content generated **8K interactions**, representing a **100% increase**.
- **Instagram visits:** The Culture Ards and North Down Instagram profile recorded **5.9K visits**, an increase of **121%**.

Website



Website analytics for the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026 recorded 36K total users, 150K views, 545K event count, and 36K active users.

Note: Any reduction in website traffic should be considered within the context of changing online search behaviours, with more users accessing information through AI-generated search results and summaries rather than visiting websites directly.

PR Activity

During the reporting period, the Arts and Heritage Marketing Officer distributed 53 media releases, generating a wide range of media coverage across local newspapers, online publications and TV and radio interviews.

A comprehensive record of media coverage is available in the media book:

Arts and Heritage PR Coverage 25-26.pdf

Appendix 2 Heritage Statistics

Exhibitions

Location	Title	
Long Gallery	High Latitudes	Art Exhibition highlighting fragile beauty of the Arctic
Long Gallery	Seventy Years in the Picture	Exhibition about the history of photography
Long Gallery	'Inspiration and Transformation'	'Inspiration and Transformation' An exhibition of works by famous Co. Down Artists
Long Gallery	The History Detectives	An exploration of the history of Balloo and Killinchy
Long Gallery	Made in AND	Pop-Up Christmas Shop featuring gift ideas from local artist and craft businesses
Long Gallery	Between Worlds	Art exhibition by art collective Veridian
Community Gallery	Carrickmannon PS Bicentenary	200 years of school history
Community Gallery	VE Day Recollections	Reminiscence with local groups on memories of the end of WW2
Community Gallery	Know Your Worth	Tile exhibition by Inspiring Yarns
Community Gallery	Co. Down, the Cariboo Goldrush and the foundations of British Columbia	Exhibition of Ulster-Scots pioneers in the Pacific Northwest
Community Gallery	Building Boats at Ballyholme	Exhibition of boat building history
Cafe Gallery	Memories	Collection of artworks by artist Steve Cheung
Cafe Gallery	Co Down in Monochrome	Artworks by Imperious Cuckoo
Cafe Gallery	A walk through the coastal path of North Down	Exhibition by Bangor artist Gail Rider
Cafe Gallery	Creative Peninsula	Annual exhibition of Creative Peninsula artworks
Cafe Gallery	Sgraffito	Art exhibition by Jakki Trainor

Cafe Gallery	Elemental Elegance	Exhibition of the works of Ellen Cunningham from Cula Ceramics
Cafe Gallery	The Beauty of Light	Exhibition of the images produced by Bangor and North Down Camera Club
Cafe Gallery	David Campbell	Exhibition of the artwork of local artist David Campbell

Events & Workshops

Event	**Numbers**
Easter trail	191
Easter Monday Visitors	364
Easter Tuesday Visitors	441
Little Historians Workshops	15 per day
'Air Raids, Wardens and Whistles' (*heritage talk*)	40
VE Day Valhalla Living History Event	248
Book Launch: *Max's Magical Visit to the Museum*	20
Launch of Art exhibition 'Inspiration & Transformation'	65
Yoga for Young Book Lovers	20
Un-bee-lievable History	21
Launch Of History Detectives Exhibition	63
Fields of Change Conference	58
Not-So-Scary Halloween	163
Leid & Learn Ulster Scots Talk	50
Christmas Late Night Shopping Event	205
Ceramic Decoration Workshop	8
Handmade Holiday Magic	37
A Moo-sical Christmas Adventure	36

Between Worlds Launch Event	72
Bangor Boats Exhibition Launch	57
The Beauty of Light Photography Talk	27
Arts Night	450

Talks

Group	**Numbers**
Visiting choir from Bobbio, Italy	50
A wonder ahead of its time	35
Gardeners Question time (sold out)	45
Recording & Transforming Art talk (sold out)	41
How to become a history detective (sold out)	44

Tours

Group	**Numbers**
Visiting choir from Bobbio, Italy	50
Venture Kids	45
Venture Kids	37
Avondale Hub, Newtownards	14
European Heritage Open Day Castle Tour	100
REACT NI	49
8th Bangor Brownies	25
Age NI	16
Student Council	40
4th Bangor Cubs	44
Avondale Hub	5
Killard House	15
QUB students	14

School Visits

School	**Numbers Pupils/Adults**
Cliftonville Integrated Primary School	61
Tiddli-Winks Playgroup	18
Red Brick House Nursery	44
Rathmore Nursery Unit	59
Ballymagee Nursery Unit	26
Kilmaine Primary School (P1)	77
Comber Primary School	48

Play-a-way Preschool	23
Little Acorns Preschool	38
Little Doves Childcare Centre, Ards	33
Bees Nees Early Years Centre, Ards	26
100 Acre Wood Playgroup, Comber	44
St Comgall's Preschool, Bangor	26
Portavogie Primary School	14
Ballygowan Community Playgroup	29
Country Kids Preschool, Donaghadee	25
Carrowdore Early Years	19
Movilla Nursery, Newtownards	23
Hollybank Primary School, Newtownabbey	25
Earlview Primary School, Newtownabbey	29
Bangor Academy (Year 8)	210
Bangor Central IPS	84
St Joseph's Primary School, Carryduff	64
Bloomfield Primary School, Bangor	76
St Mary's Primary School, Kircubbin	41
Dundonald Primary School	129
Regent House Prep School, Ards	18
Holy Family Primary School, Belfast	67
Brownlee Primary School, Lisburn	34
Holy Evangelists' Primary School, Belfast	69
Glenwood Primary School, Belfast	82
Drumlins Integrated Primary School, Ballynahinch	28
St Michael's Primary School, Belfast	66
Killinchy Primary School	54
St Joseph's Primary School, Belfast	62
Ballywalter Primary School	31
Lisnasharragh Primary School, Belfast	67
Millisle Primary School	33
Seymour Hill Primary School, Belfast	26
St Finian's Primary School, Newtownards	30
St Joseph's Primary School, Ballyhackamore	90
Ballyholme Primary School	100
Glencraig Integrated Primary School, Holywood	34
Rockport School, Holywood	11
St Mary's Primary School, Comber	17
Carnmoney Primary School, Newtownabbey	61
Brooklands Primary School, Dundonald	65
Largymore Primary School, Lisburn	32
Ballyholme Primary School (*Viking*)	98
Castle Gardens Primary School (Newtownards)	56
King's Park Primary School (Newtownabbey)	50
Ballymagee Primary School (Bangor)	66
Cregagh Primary School (Belfast)	23

Harding Memorial Primary School (Belfast)	23
Bangor Central Integrated Primary School	75
St Malachy's Primary School (Bangor)	56
Grange Park Primary School (Bangor)	68
Holy Child Primary School (Belfast)	74
Bright Sparks Montessori Pre School (Bangor)	20
Victoria Primary School (Newtownards)	96
Ballyvester Primary School (Donaghadee)	21
St Caolan's Primary School (Downpatrick)	12
Longstone Special School (Dundonald)	19
Springhill Primary School (Belfast)	38
Holy Cross Girls' Primary School (Belfast)	27
Bright Sparks Montessori Pre School (Bangor)	16
Kilcooley Primary School (Bangor)	24
St Colman's Primary School (Lambeg)	62
Fullerton House Prep School (Belfast)	27

Outreach

Group	**Numbers**
Rocky Acres Care Home	11
Bramblewood Care Home	22
Conlig Seniors	18
Avondale Hub, Newtownards	13
Donaghadee Historical Society	46
Conlig Seniors	19
Family History in North Down	32
Ballycopeland Care Home	16
Pickie to Stricklands Glen Heritage Walk	8
Scrabo Isle Care Home	25
Bramblewood Care Home	21
Mullaghaboy Care Home	16
Bramblewood Care Home	22
Tonic Fold	29
Avondale Hub, Newtownards	11
Bangor Abbey Parish – St Comgall's/ Family Day event	100+
Bangor Abbey Mothers' Union	36
Bangor Social and Learning Group	18
Family History in North Down and Ards	21
Holywood to Cultra Heritage Walk	13
Oakmont Care Home	13
Bramblewood Care Home	22
Avondale Hub, Newtownards	14
Bramblewood Care Home	21
Strides Day Opportunities Service	7
Avondale Hub, Newtownards	13

Strides Day Opportunities Service	6
Bramblewood Care Home	23
Avondale Hub, Newtownards	13
Bramblewood Care Home	25
Groomsport to Ballyholme Heritage Walk	7
School's Out @ Castle Gardens PS, Ards	25
Avondale Hub, Newtownards	6
Ballyholme Probus Club	13
Strides Day Opportunities Service	10
Avondale Hub, Newtownards	5
Shore Street Presbyterian Church Men's Group	19
Avondale Hub, Newtownards	6
Avondale Hub, Newtownards	6
Avondale Hub, Newtownards	5
Dementia Group, Bangor Hub	7
Avondale Hub, Newtownards	5
Avondale Hub, Newtownards	4
Avondale Hub, Newtownards	5
Strides Day Opportunities Service, Bangor	10
Ballygrainey Residential Home, Bangor	11

Heritage Grants 2025-26

Organisation	**Project**	**Amount claimed**
Portaferry and Strangford Trust	Booklets - *A Wee Bit of Maritime History*	500.00
Discover Groomsport	Leaflets – *Little Bits of History of Groomsport*	500.00
Ards Historical Society	Booklet – *Newtownards the Town I Know so Well by Ivan Coffee*	500.00
Upper Ards Historical Society	Journal - *The 2025 Journal of the Upper Ards Historical Society*	500.00
Donaghadee Community Development Association	VE-Day History Panels and Floral Display - *Donaghadee: Least We Forget*	500.00
Donaghadee Heritage Preservation Company	Booklets - *The Story of the Sir Samuel Kelly: A Children's Guide to Donaghadee Lifeboat*	500.00
Donaghadee Parish Church Halls	Publication - *Donaghadee Parish Church, Quadricentennial Anniversary, 1626-2026*	500.00
Portavogie Cultural and Heritage Society	Booklet - 12th Heritage Booklet Publication	500.00
Portaferry WI	Archive - *Echos From The Past: 90 Years of Portaferry WI*	0.00*
Holywood u3a History & Archive groups	Archive - Storage of Holywood District u3a History Archive	245.98

	Total grant spend	**4245.98**

* Did not complete project

Ulster-Scots Talks and Events Grant 2025-26

Grant type	**Organisation**	**Amount claimed**
Talk	Holywood u3a - History Group	35.00
Talk	Upper Ards Historical	84.00
Talk	Comber Historical	60.00
Talk	Family History in Ards and North Down	100.00
Talk	Ballywalter & District Historical Society	125.00
Talk	Cloughey Heritage Ltd.	100.00
Talk	Auld Bangor Historical & Cultural Society	135.00
Talk	Bangor Social Learning Group	65.00
	Talks subtotal	704.00
Leid & Lairn	Portavogie Culture and Heritage Society	250.00
Leid & Lairn	Cottown Loyal Orange Lodge No . 1029	0.00*
Leid & Lairn	Portaferry Recreation Hub/ Community Services Ltd.	250.00
Leid & Lairn	Ards Historical Society	155.50
Leid & Lairn	Cloughey Heritage Ltd.	241.93
Leid & Lairn	Holywood u3a - Main group	205.10
Leid & Lairn	Donaghadee Heritage Preservation Ltd.	240.00
	Events subtotal	1342.53
	Total grant spend	**2046.53**

*Event did not take place

Visitor Feedback Form

Age Group	**Percentage**
16-24	17.72%
25-34	12.34%
35-44	14.86%
45-54	16.75%
55-64	19.27%
65+	19.06%

Gender	Percentage
Male	36.16%
Female	61.09%
Non-binary	0.24%
Prefer to self describe	0.72%
Not answered	1.79%

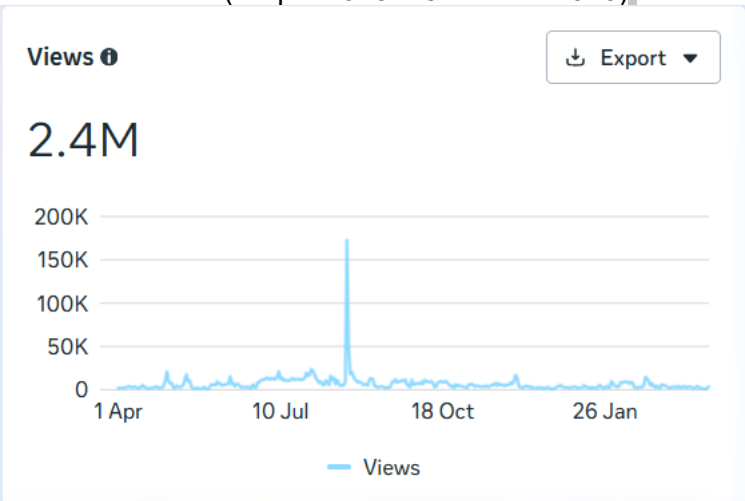
Location of Visitor	Percentage
Ards and North Down	33.68%
Elsewhere in Northern Ireland	16.14%
Republic of Ireland	6.85%
United Kingdom	14.76%
Europe	7.87%
USA	12.73%
Other	7.97%

Rating Experience	Percentage
Excellent	88.96%
Good	9.48%
Average	1.56%
Poor	0%

Where did you hear about us?	Percentage
Social Media	15.82%
Printed materials	2.4%
Local Press	0%
Radio	0%
Email	0%
Website	8.21%
Google	9%
Word of mouth	19.26%
Recommendation	4.68%
Walking past	7.92%
Live locally	10.26%
Regular Visitor	9.01%
Other *	13.44%

Online Engagement Infographics:

Facebook Views (1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026)



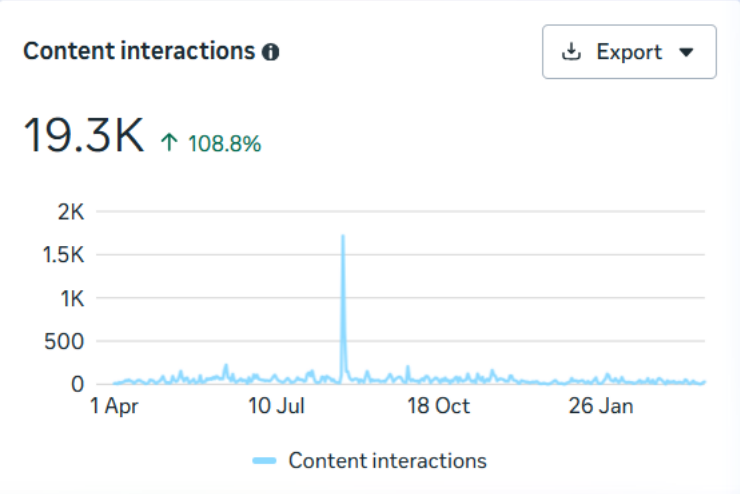
Facebook content generated 2.4M views during the reporting period.

Instagram Views (1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026)



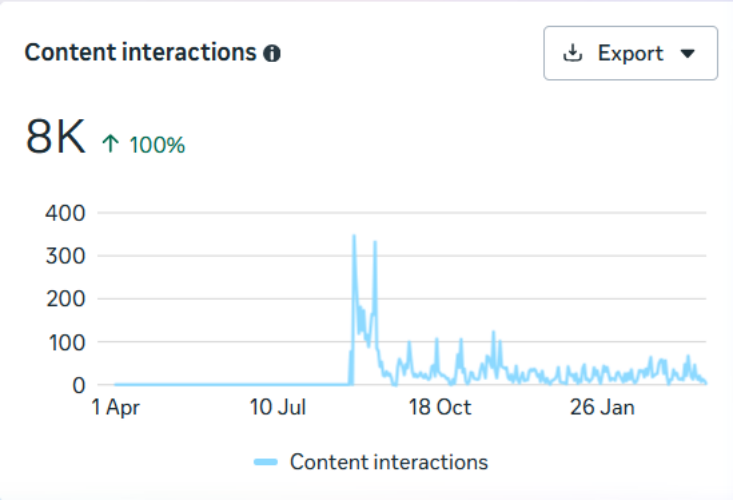
Instagram content recorded 324.0K views, representing a 100% increase.

Facebook Interactions 1 April 25 – 31 March 26



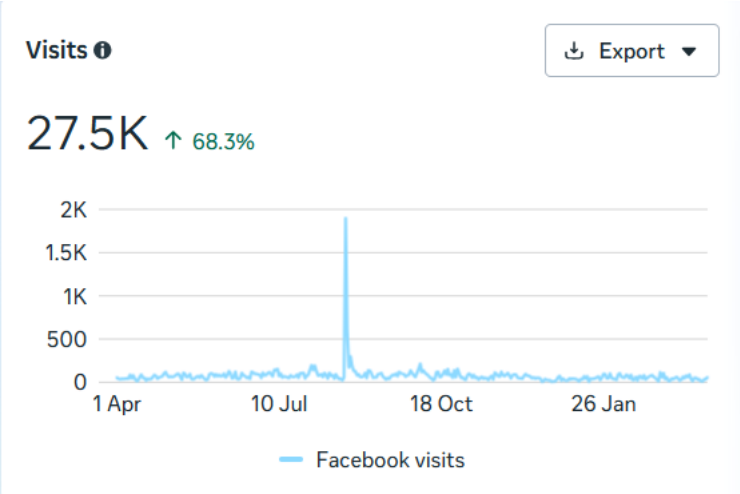
Facebook content received 19.3K interactions, an increase of 108.8%.

Instagram Interactions 1 April 25 – 31 March 26



Instagram content generated 8K interactions, representing a 100% increase.

Culture Ards and North Down Facebook visits



The Culture Ards and North Down Facebook page recorded **27.5K visits**, an increase of **68.3%.**

Culture Ards and North Down Instagram visits



The Culture Ards and North Down Instagram profile recorded 5.9K visits, an increase of 121%.

ITEM 6

Ards and North Down Borough Council

Report Classification	Unclassified
Exemption Reason	Not Applicable
	If multiple:
Meeting	Place and Prosperity Committee
Date of Meeting	05 November 2026
Responsible Director	Director of Place and Prosperity
Responsible Head of Service	Head of Tourism, Arts and Heritage
Report title	Visit Belfast Annual Overview 2025/26
Attachments	Appendix 1 - Visual Examples of Visit Belfast 2025/26 Service Level Agreement Activity
File Reference (if applicable)	170871
Legislation	Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014
Resource Implications	None Narrative:
Screening Requirements	*The Council will commit to consider the implication of all reports under the categories of Section 75, Rural Needs, Data Protection, Climate and Sustainability:* Screening of report not required
Link to Corporate Plan Priority and Outcome	Priority 1: Economic 4. A vibrant, attractive, sustainable Borough for citizens, visitors, businesses and investors If multiple:

Background
The Council has maintained a Regional Tourism Partnership (RTP) Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Visit Belfast since 2015. The partnership supports destination marketing, visitor servicing and tourism development activity, extending the reach of the Council's tourism promotion through Visit Belfast's established marketing, trade and visitor networks.

- The Council's annual contribution remained at £30,000 during 2025/26.
- Additional promotional space within the VB Welcome Centre was secured for a further payment of £6,500.

Key Issues
The partnership delivered significant promotional and visitor servicing benefits for Ards and North Down, including:

- 140 million+ marketing impacts
- 817,236 email marketing reach (Ards and North Down included in 66 ezines – average open rate 29% to 32%)
- 5.8 million social media impressions
- 75 partner-focused videos
- 200,000 social media engagements
- 723,234 visitor enquiries handled through Visit Belfast's visitor servicing network (30,450 Ards and North Down specifically)
- 130,000 visitor guides distributed

Ards and North Down achieved strong visibility, increased visitor engagement, and measurable economic contribution through coordinated marketing, trade, and visitor servicing activity delivered by Visit Belfast.

The attached Appendix 1 provides some visual examples of the 2025/26 SLA.

Destination Marketing and Visitor Promotion
Throughout 2025/26, Ards and North Down featured prominently across Visit Belfast's destination marketing activity, including seasonal campaigns, website content, social media channels, visitor publications, email marketing and visitor servicing platforms. This activity generated significant exposure for local attractions, events, food and drink experiences, accommodation providers and visitor experiences across domestic and international markets.

Travel Trade and Industry Development
Visit Belfast continued to promote Ards and North Down through tourism exhibitions, sales missions, familiarisation visits and buyer engagement programmes. The Borough benefited from engagement with more than 400 travel trade buyers, helping strengthen relationships with tour operators and tourism intermediaries, while supporting an estimated £3 million in leisure trade activity.

Visitor Servicing
The Borough benefited from promotion through Visit Belfast's extensive visitor servicing network, including the Belfast Visitor Centre, airports, cruise terminal and digital visitor information channels. This activity helped connect potential visitors with

local attractions, accommodation providers, events and experiences throughout the year.

Value of Investment
For an annual investment of £36,500, the Council benefited from extensive destination marketing, visitor servicing and trade engagement activity that would be difficult and significantly more costly to deliver independently. In September 2025 the Council approved an enhanced partnership arrangement for year 2026/27 and two further years to afford additional strategic benefits including digital campaign delivery and Grand Central Station activation.

The partnership continues to provide strong value for money through access to established marketing channels, visitor audiences, travel trade networks and regional tourism opportunities. Through this investment, Ards and North Down has benefited from significant destination exposure, increased visitor engagement and enhanced opportunities for tourism businesses across the Borough.

Next steps and Summary
Visit Belfast continues to be a high-performing and strategic tourism partner for the Council. During 2025/26, the Regional Tourism Partnership delivered significant destination marketing, visitor servicing and tourism development activity that generated substantial reach and engagement across consumer, travel trade and visitor audiences.

The strong performance achieved during 2025/26 provides a solid foundation as the partnership moves into a new phase. The enhanced Regional Tourism Partnership model presents opportunities to further strengthen destination marketing, digital promotion and travel trade engagement, helping to ensure Ards and North Down remains highly visible to potential visitors and continues to maximise opportunities for tourism growth and economic benefit.

The outcomes delivered during 2025/26 demonstrate the continued value of the partnership and its contribution to the Council's wider tourism, place promotion and economic development objectives.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Council **Notes** the outputs of the Visit Belfast Partnership in 2025/26.

October 2026

Ards and North Down Borough Council

Appendix 1

Visit Belfast Promotional Activity

Overview Visual Examples Summary 2025/26 SLA

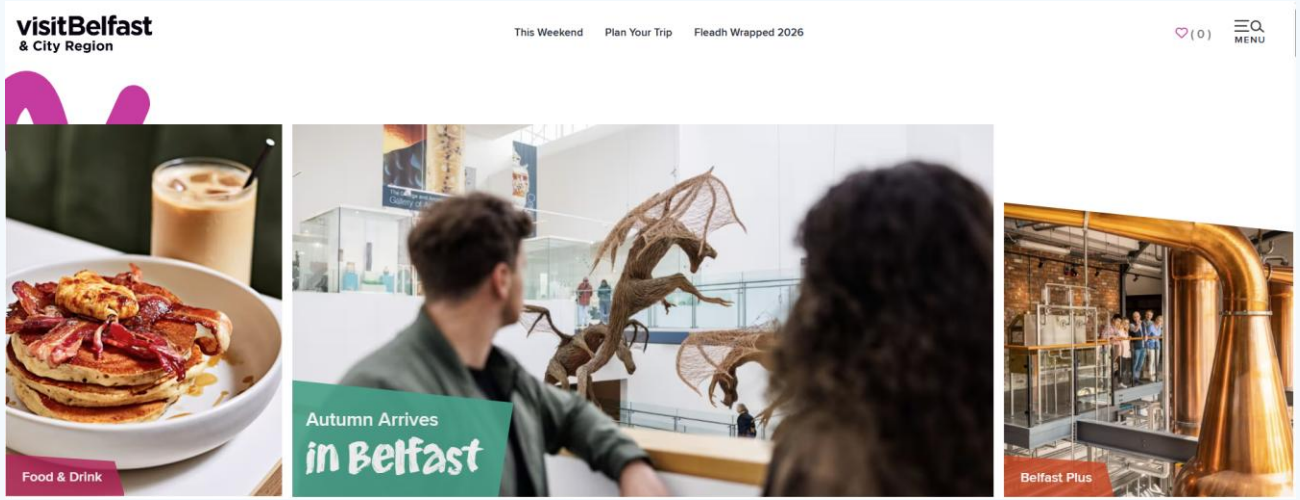
Visit Belfast AND SLA

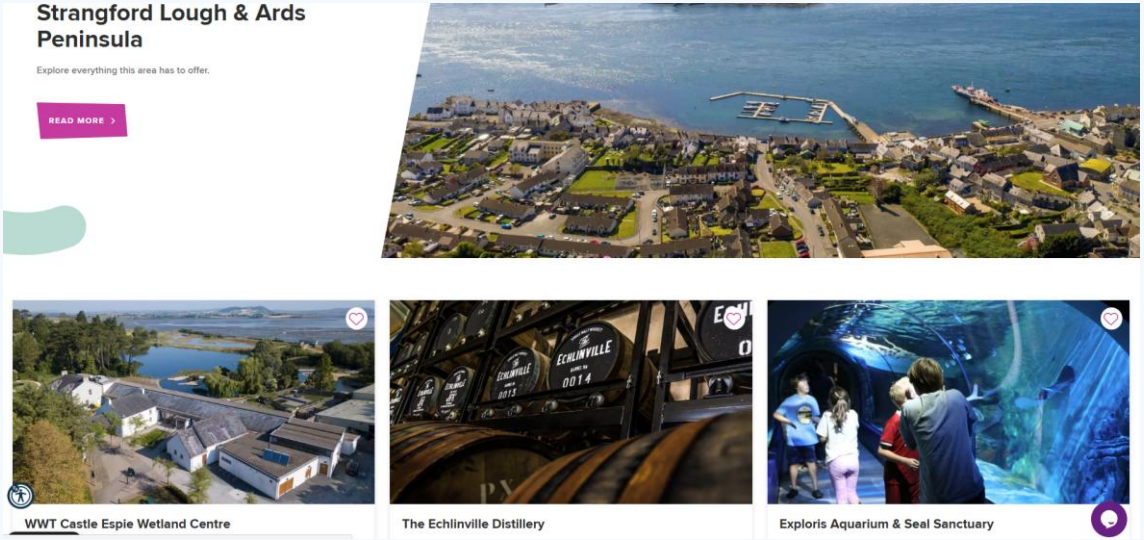
Key Digital Channels Promotional Activity

Ards and North Down Borough Council
www.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk

Web Dedicated City Region Promotion

216,949 visits to online partner profiles per annum on Visit Belfast Site





Ards and North Down Borough Council
www.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk

Web Dedicated City Region Promotion

AND tourism featured in **18** blogs

Dedicated Ards and North Down itineraries in Belfast Plus – City Region section





Creative Peninsula

/event/creative-peninsula/105340101/ - Events

... and demonstrations and our annual outdoor Twilight Craft Market, all taking place in the picturesque Borough of ***Ards*** and ***North Down***. Our Borough ... and ***North Down***. Now in its 25th year, and with some exciting new collaborations, this thriving annual event features exhibitions, workshops ... Creative Peninsula is Northern Ireland's premier celebration of Art and Craft, taking place in the picturesque borough of ***Ards*** ...



Family Fun – Belfast Plus

/blog/post/belfast-plus-family-fun-attractions-and-experiences/ - Blog

Find something for all the family to enjoy with our picks for family fun attractions in both ***Ards*** and ***North Down*** and Lisburn and Castlereagh, only a few minutes away from ...



Shorelife Celebration

/event/shorelife-celebration/110159101/ - Events

Enjoy free entry at this exciting event, brought to you by ***Ards*** and ***North Down*** Borough Council in partnership with Mount Stewart ... . Further information on the pre-bookable event buses will be available soon on the ***Ards*** and ***North Down*** website. • They encourage visitors ... in person or by phone via ***Ards*** and ***North Down*** Visitor Information Centres. • Event details are subject to change. • For further information ...



10 Things To Do Within a Half Hour's Drive of Belfast

/blog/post/10-things-to-do-within-a-half-hours-drive-of-belfast/ - Blog

Access both countryside and sea shore within a short drive from Belfast, with exciting attractions, historic houses and amazing ... scenery to enjoy. Below we look at some of the highlights in the Lisburn, Castlereagh, ***Ards*** and ***North Down*** areas of Northern Ireland.



Ards **and** ***North Down***

/see-do/belfast-plus/ards-north-down/ - Pages

Enjoy peaceful walks along the coast and uncover fascinating tales from ***Ards*** and ***North Down***'s unique history and heritage. Explore National Trust monuments and gardens, distilleries, museums, aquariums and farms, there really is something for all the family to ...



Taste Autumn in ***Ards*** **and** ***North Down***

/event/taste-autumn-in-ards-and-north-down/109175101/ - Events

Taste Autumn in ***Ards*** and ***North Down*** takes place across various venues in the Borough between Friday 11 and Sunday 27 September 2026 ... 2026, featuring Tide and Turf Food Festival, Portavogie. This showcase of local food and drink provides a series of seasonal foodie-themed events, with Tide and Turf Portavogie on Saturday 12 September celebrating local delicacies. Programme highlights will also include ...

Ards and North Down Borough Council
www.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk

Visit Belfast E-zines

Featuring AND

- Ards and North Down products and events were included in 30 emails
- These campaigns reached a total of 817,236 recipients and achieved an average open rate of 29%.

- Events within the council area were also featured in 33 of our weekly ‘What’s On’ ezines, distributed every Thursday.
- These were sent to 448,316 recipients and achieved an average open rate of 32%.





Ards and North Down Borough Council
www.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk

Visit Belfast Social Media Content Featuring AND

Social Media and Influencer Activity
Visit Belfast delivered strong destination visibility through social media and influencer activity, generating over 5.8 million impressions and almost 200,000 engagements across Instagram and TikTok.

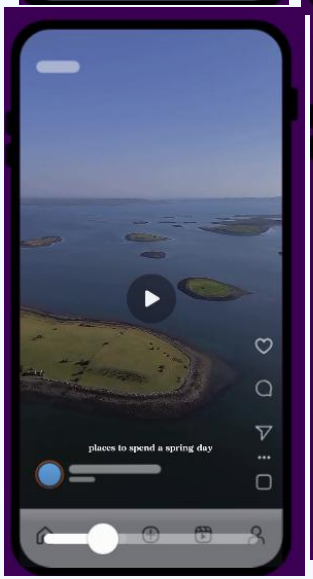
A total of 75 partner-focused videos showcased attractions, wildlife, seasonal experiences and family-friendly activities, with top-performing content featuring **Exploris Aquarium, Ulster Transport Museum, Strangford Lough** and seasonal visitor experiences.

Strong engagement between @VisitBelfast and @VisitArdsandNorthDown social channels

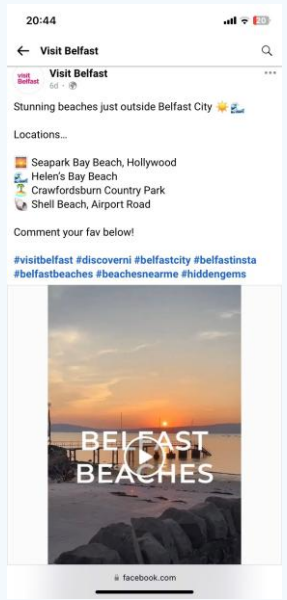












Visit Belfast AND SLA

Key Traditional Channels of Marketing Activity

Visit Belfast Literature featuring AND– digital and print

Belfast City and Region Guide

4 publications - Summer ‘25, Autumn/ Winter ‘25, Spring ‘26

Belfast Main Guide – Digital

Total print run 130k



Ards and North Down Borough Council
www.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk

Visit Belfast Literature featuring AND– digital and print





Ards and North Down Borough Council
www.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk

Visit Belfast Literature featuring AND– digital and print

Belfast Main Guide – Digital



Visit Belfast AND SLA

Ards and North Down year-round promotion at key visitor touchpoints including Belfast City Centre Welcome Centre and airports.

Key campaigns gain prominent promotion

Ards and North Down Borough Council
www.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk

Visit Belfast – City Centre Welcome Visitor Centre

8 key AND campaigns were prominently promoted including:

- Prime visibility - digital window screens in Belfast City Centre (opp. City Hall)
- Visit Belfast Welcome Centre promotional plinth and in-store digital screens the main visitor hub in Belfast.
- Grand Central (from Oct 2025)



Gold Island



External screen



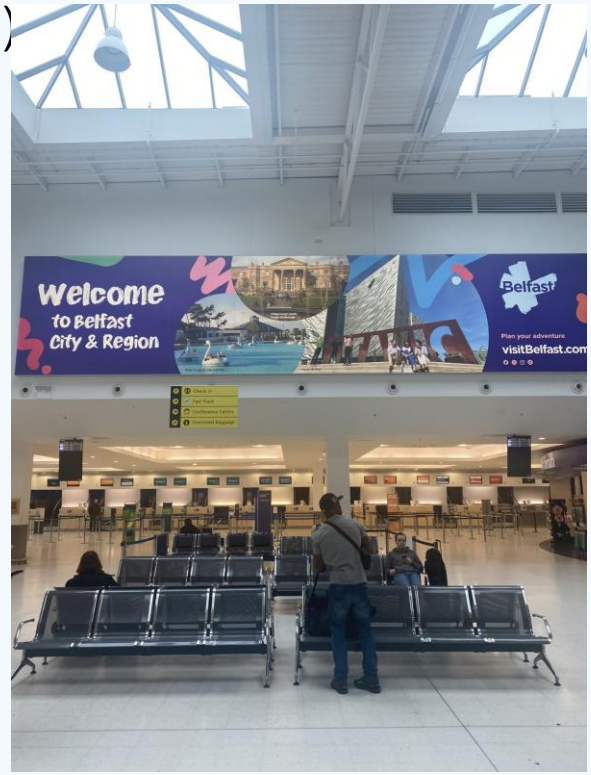


Ards and North Down Borough Council
www.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk

Visit Belfast – City Region presented at Visitor Gateways

- Prominent screen advertising RTP partners at George Best City Airport arrivals area
- Features Pickie Funpark in Bangor | Extra large backlit signage 2m x 10m
- Touch screens at visitor gateway locations | Includes RTP partner information
- 723,234 visitor enquiries handled through Visit Belfast's visitor servicing network (30,450 specifically for Ards and North Down)





Key Highlights 2025/6 Regional Tourism Partnership

The partnership delivered significant promotional and visitor servicing benefits for Ards and North Down, including:

- **140 million+ marketing impacts**
- **216,949 visits** to Ards and North Down partner profiles
- **817,236 email marketing reach** (Ards and North Down inc in 66 ezines – average open rate 29% to 32%)
- **5.8 million social media impressions**
- **75 partner-focused videos**
- **200,000 social media engagements**
- **723,234 visitor enquiries** handled through Visit Belfast's visitor servicing network (30,450 Ards and North Down specifically)
- **130,000 visitor guides** distributed
- **400+ travel trade buyer engagements**
- **£3 million leisure trade activity supported**
- **5,121 cruise passengers** participated in excursions to Ards and North Down

Ards and North Down achieved strong visibility, increased visitor engagement, and measurable economic contribution through coordinated marketing, trade, and visitor servicing activity delivered by Visit Belfast.

Ards and North Down Borough Council