

VOLUME 20: DECEMBER 2025



BOLSTER COMMUNITY

Newsletter



Community, Connection & Celebration

This Newsletter is funded by:



Southern Health
and Social Care Trust

From Newry to the wider world, hope shines bright this Christmas.

As twinkling lights begin to adorn our streets and the familiar scent of mulled spice drifts through the air, we pause to reflect on a year that has tested, inspired, and strengthened our community. In a world where the headlines can so often feel heavy, it's worth remembering that not all news is bad news – and right here in Newry, we have plenty to celebrate and be proud of.

From small acts of kindness to the tireless efforts of local groups and volunteers, our community continues to prove that connection is our greatest strength. What happens here may begin on our doorsteps, but its ripple effect reaches far beyond - reminding us that compassion, creativity, and collaboration are universal languages.

This December, we're shining a light on the people and projects that make our corner of the world such a special place. Our Bolster Buddies have been hard at work in the candle shop, pouring care into every handmade piece, ready to bring a little extra warmth to homes near and far. We've loved seeing so many friendly faces at local Christmas fairs and markets, including our annual Sip & Shop, where festive joy is rivalled only by the generosity that inspires it.



Some of our board & team at the SENI Awards 2025.
Congratulations team!

Meanwhile, our community programmes have continued to thrive. To name only a few, the Clover Club has been spreading friendship and laughter, the Social Kitchen has been serving up hearty meals and conversation; and Autism Connect has provided a vital space for understanding and connection. These are not just programmes. They are lifelines of belonging, and together they paint a powerful picture of what community truly means. At the heart of all we do lies our Family Support service, standing beside parents, carers and children through life's challenges and changes. Whether it's offering a listening ear, practical advice, or a helping hand in times of need, our team has been there – walking alongside families as they rebuild confidence, rediscover joy, and create stronger, more connected homes. In a world that can sometimes feel uncertain, this support reminds us that no one has to face their struggles alone. As the year draws to a close, we look ahead with gratitude and optimism. The world may feel vast and unpredictable at times, but our little well of hope here in Newry continues to flow – steady, strong, and full of promise. So here's to connection, to celebration, and to every one of you who makes this community shine. Please note that Bolster Community will be closed from Saturday 20th December and will reopen on Monday 5th January 2026. We look forward to welcoming you back in the new year!!



We are this year's winners of the Product Based Social Enterprise Award. Thank you to Social Enterprise Northern Ireland!

Ministerial Visit Shines a Light on An Droichead



We were delighted to welcome Economy Minister Caoimhe Archibald MLA to our Marcus Street office to celebrate the achievements of the young people participating in our An Droichead programme. Funded through the Department for the Economy NI's Apprenticeship Inclusion Challenge Fund, An Droichead is a new full-time, dual-pathway initiative supporting young people aged 16+ with additional needs. Delivered in partnership with St Paul's Bessbrook, the programme provides recognised qualifications, work experience, employability and life skills, and a supported pathway into apprenticeships or employment. We extend our thanks to the Minister, parents, partners, employers, and – most importantly – the young people who shared their inspiring stories. Together, we are helping to build a more inclusive community where every young person can thrive.



Students and staff of An Droichead. A very proud moment for all involved.



[Left to right] Principal of St. Paul's Daithí Murray, Bolster Operations Allison Slater, Economy Minister Caoimhe Archibald, Project Lead Marion McMahon and CEO of Bolster, Jacinta Linden.

Autism Connect - What's New and What's Ahead

Across Newry, Armagh/Portadown, Banbridge and Craigavon, Autism Connect has been buzzing with activity. Recent highlights, from festive trips to the Christmas Markets, to our calming Silent Reading Night, to our well-attended Coffee Morning in Portadown, have shown just how valuable these relaxed social spaces are for autistic and neurodiverse adults. These events will continue as we move into the new year, with even more opportunities to meet new people, try something different, and feel part of a welcoming community.

Alongside our social hubs, the Autism & Me programme will continue into 2026. This six-week conversational series explores life as an autistic adult, offering peer support, shared learning, and practical strategies for everyday situations. New courses will be opening in the new year, and we encourage anyone interested to register their interest. For more info email: autismconnect@bolstercommunity.org or ask for Sharon on 028 3083 5764.

We're excited to build on this momentum with a broader events calendar in 2026 – more social meet-ups, more themed nights, more opportunities to connect, and more spaces designed with neurodiverse adults at the heart. Whether you're keen to join a reading night, meet new people over coffee, or take part in programmes like Autism & Me, there will be plenty of ways to get involved. Autism Connect is all about community, confidence and connection, and the year ahead is full of opportunities to be part of it. We'd love to welcome new members as we continue to grow.

Our sincerest thanks to The National Lottery, GPs Federation, and Southern Health & Social Care Trust (SHSCT) for supporting Autism Connect. Your support helps strengthen connection and understanding for autistic people and their families.



Caring for Families This Winter & Always

Winter is a time when the warmth of connection matters most. At Bolster Community, we know that for many families, the simple act of feeling supported and connected can make all the difference. For families facing challenges, having someone to turn to, whether that be for a chat, advice, or a helping hand, can bring hope and reassurance during a season that can sometimes feel lonely.

"Just having someone to talk to made all the difference. It reminded us we're not alone."

"The support wasn't about fixing everything at once, it was about feeling seen and connected when life felt heavy."

"The practical help we received meant we could focus on being together, without the usual stress."

These moments of connection extend far beyond Christmas. They remind us that community isn't just about coming together for celebrations, but about being there for each other every day through the small struggles, the big challenges, and everything in between. This winter, let's cherish the power of connection. Whether it's reaching out, sharing a smile, or simply listening, each small act strengthens our community and creates a sense of belonging for everyone.



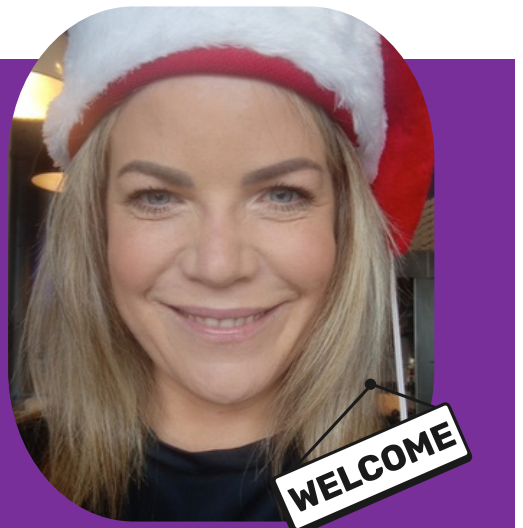
Expanding Our Support: Now Reaching Families in Craigavon

This commitment to connection is growing beyond Newry. We are delighted to share that Bolster Community now offers Family Support in Craigavon, extending our reach to even more families who may need a listening ear, practical guidance, or a steady presence during difficult times. Our Craigavon team is already building meaningful relationships, offering the same compassionate, responsive support that makes families feel understood, valued, and less alone. We are also pleased to warmly welcome Tanya and Jacqueline to the Bolster Community team!! Based in Craigavon, they are already building meaningful relationships and offering the same compassionate, responsive support that helps families feel understood, valued, and less alone.

Whether you're in Newry, Craigavon, or the surrounding areas, Bolster Community is here to walk alongside you – strengthening families, fostering connection, and helping you navigate whatever challenges winter, or life, may bring. If you or someone you know could use a little extra support, we are here to listen and connect. Contact us on 028 3083 5764 for more information on our Family Support Services.

As we move through the winter months, we're reminded that community isn't defined by geography alone. Community is shaped by the connections we nurture, the moments of reassurance we share, and the small celebrations of strength that happen quietly in families every day. Whether support is offered around a kitchen table in Newry or during a doorstep chat in Craigavon, the heart of our work remains the same: standing together, encouraging one another, and recognising the resilience that grows when people feel held by their community.

To enquire about a referral to the N&M Family Support Hub please contact Bolster Community on 028 3083 5764.



Get Well Soon, Lofty

Gerard, wishing you a gentle recovery and a quick return to full health. Things just aren't the same without your wit, stories, and legendary presence brightening every room. Your 70th may not have unfolded quite as originally planned, but the love, laughter, and good wishes surrounding you said everything: you are truly one of Newry's great characters. Your absence is felt every day in the Starbites kitchen. Your banter, your mischief, the way you effortlessly lift the place with a single comment or grin. The team misses you greatly, and the craic just isn't quite the same without you holding court at your usual spot. Newry continues to cherish its own, and Lofty, you stand proudly among the best of them.

Take this time to rest and recharge. We know you'll make the most of your 70th year and stretch the celebration for all it's worth. As you should! Get well soon, Gerard. We're all behind you, and eagerly awaiting the return of that signature cheeky smile in 2026.



LAYERED LIVES

WOMEN SUPPORTING WOMEN

Are you a neurodivergent woman aged 16–30?

Join us for the 'Layered Lives' programme – a safe, empowering space to explore all things relationships – connect with others, gain valuable tools and find community.



Join us to explore what makes **healthy and unhealthy relationships**, learn how to recognise **red flags**, establish and manage **boundaries** and maintain **personal safety** both on and off line.

We'll look at **all kinds of relationships** from friends & family to romantic relationships.

To enquire please contact Tracy or Sharon at Bolster Community on 028 3083 35764

OR email us at info@bolstercommunity.org

The Layered Lives programme is running in various locations this autumn through the Newry & Mourne and ABC Council Areas – please contact our team if you would like to find out more – everyone deserves to feel safe, informed and empowered!!

Layered Lives in 2026

Layered Lives is back for 2026, offering neurodiverse women a supportive, empowering space to explore all things relationships. Over six in-person sessions, participants will look at healthy vs. unhealthy dynamics, recognising red flags, building boundaries, staying safe online and offline, and sharing lived experiences in a judgment-free community. Facilitator, Bolster's very own Tracy McCartney, has seen the impact of the programme first-hand and encourages anyone who feels it might be for them to reach out.

Layered Lives welcomes any woman who identifies as neurodiverse and wants to navigate relationships with greater clarity, confidence, and support. Diagnosis or no.

Whether you're seeking guidance, connection, or simply a space to be heard, Layered Lives offers a nurturing environment where your experiences are valued. Join us to build confidence, strengthen relationships, and connect with other neurodiverse women who understand your journey. We extend our sincere thanks to Newry, Mourne & Down District Council (NM&DDC) and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) for their continued support on this project.

Email: info@bolstercommunity.org
Phone Justina on : 028 3083 5764



Merry Christmas



It's been a whirl of a year, hasn't it? From bustling programmes that kept us on our toes, to Christmas markets scented with cinnamon and cold air, to candle making sessions where wax, wick, and warm inspiration result in something truly beautiful. We've sold, crafted, learned, and laughed our way through it all, a bright little blaze of community and creativity lighting every step. Thank you for being a part of it.



Merry Christmas

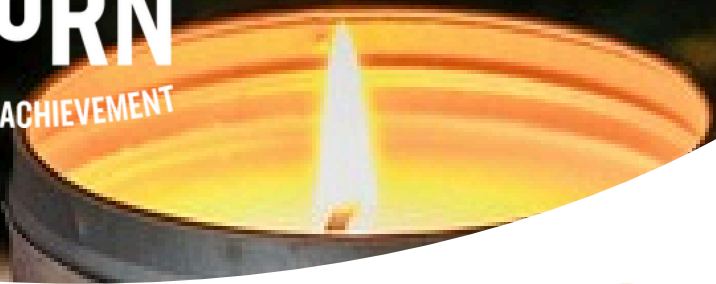
From

**BOLSTER
COMMUNITY**



ACORN

SCENTS OF ACHIEVEMENT



A Candlelit Christmas

In the heart of Northern Ireland, the gentle glow of candlelight carries more than just a festive scent, it tells a story of community. At Acorn, every candle, wax melt and diffuser is lovingly handcrafted by our talented makers: young adults with diverse abilities who pour care, pride and joy into every creation.

This season, our Christmas Spice and Cranberry, Orange & Cinnamon collections fill the air with the unmistakable warmth of winter. These scents bring comfort, nostalgia, and togetherness to any home. But what makes these gifts truly special is the meaning behind them. Each flicker of flame represents opportunity, empowerment and the belief that everyone deserves to shine.

Where Community Shines Brightest

At Acorn, we've built more than a workspace, we've created a place of belonging. Our makers learn new skills, grow in confidence, and take pride in knowing that what they do makes a real difference. As one of our team so beautifully put it, "I get excited every day I come in to the office. Seeing the Bolster staff and my friends. It feels like a really big family!"

"I get excited every day I come in to the office. Seeing the Bolster staff and my friends. It feels like a really big family!"



Every Acorn product gives back – with 100% of profits supporting Bolster Community, our parent charity dedicated to helping families, young people, and the most vulnerable across Newry and beyond. So when you choose an Acorn candle this Christmas, you're not just buying a gift, you're helping light the way for others. As the year draws to a close, and the world outside glimmers with festive sparkle, we're reminded that even the smallest light can brighten the darkest days. From all of us at Bolster Community and Acorn, thank you for being part of our journey, for supporting local makers, and for helping our little flame of hope burn ever brighter. Wishing you a peaceful Christmas filled with warmth, kindness, and connection. See you all again in 2026!!



ORDER ONLINE OR INSTORE

Order online at: www.acornshop.co.uk

Contact us at: acorn@bolstercommunity.org

Follow us on instagram @acorncandle and keep an eye out for our Xmas markets, corporate gifting also possible for all budgets.



A Social Enterprise from

BOLSTER
COMMUNITY



Programmes & Services coming up in 2026
for further detail on anything listed below, please
contact us on **028 3083 5764**

BOLSTER COMMUNITY

Parents Plus Adolescents

This evidence-based parenting course is designed to support parents in their vital role. Empowering them to find their own solutions to the everyday challenges that arise during the teenage years.



Newry starts **8/02/2026**
Held at Bolster Community
Marcus Street Office.

PARENTS PLUS ADHD

An 8-wk evidence-based course for parents of children with ADHD beginning this January. Parenting is far from easy, having many ups and downs, and posing great challenges and demands. This course delves into how to tackle these challenges.

Armagh starts **22/01/2026**

LAYERED LIVES

Layered Lives is a unique, neurodivergent-friendly programme for young women aged 16-30 and will run across the NMD and ABC Council areas. As well as looking at self-esteem and building confidence, the programme will offer a safe, empowering space for young women to talk, connect and benefit from peer support.

Contact Justina or Tracy on
028 3083 5764 or email at
justina@bolstercommunity.org

TOTS & TEA

Tots and Tea is a friendly group of parents/carers and children who are all on the first steps of their journey through disability and we have meet-ups every week.

Contact Julie-Anne at Bolster for further details



Employability Classroom Assistant Course, Markethill

OCN qualification, cv and interview prep as well as peer support and connection throughout the course.

Starts Markethill
Jan 26



CLOVER CLUB

Clover Club aims to build social connection and emotional support for and between seniors in the Newry and Mourne Area. From a light bite, to sewing and dancing! It is a proud and essential part of our Senior services that offers practical support and a sense of fun later in life.

Clover Club runs once a fortnight in the Meadow & Armagh Rd Community Centre. Registrations required. Please contact Paula at Bolster for details



AUTISM CONNECT

Autism Connect is for adults (18+) either with or awaiting an autism-only diagnosis (i.e. not supported elsewhere) and living in the Southern Trust. This is a place of community, connection and support!

For further info on our Newry, Banbridge & Craigavon groups contact Sharon at Bolster on **028 3083 5764** or email at autismconnect@bolstercommunity.org

Employability Classroom Assistant Course, Banbridge

This bespoke 10-week programme will take you through the prep and planning to help you get there. OCN qualification, cv and interview prep as well as peer support and connection throughout the course.

Starts Banbridge
Jan 26

Need more info?

Call **028 3083 5764** for all programme enquiries, check out our website and follow us on socials!



STAR BITES 57

A safe, warm space where registered service users & Housing Executive Tenants can be supported & connect.

Start date: Ongoing.
Time: 10AM TO 1PM
Location: Marcus Street