



Northern
Ireland
Office

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP FUND

Application guidance

May 2026

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1. Introduction

1. The Community Partnership Fund provides up to £1m to a forum of established voluntary organisations to support grassroots community groups to develop ambitious ideas, build stronger networks and grow capability to access and deliver funding. This initiative aims to address specific barriers preventing smaller organisations from accessing the resources they need to better support their communities.
2. Northern Ireland's established community and voluntary sector is defined by an extensive and diverse range of expertise, developed through decades of first-hand experience in the delivery of interventions, solutions and support for the communities of Northern Ireland. There is much to be learned from the sector at the heart of delivering on behalf of local communities.
3. Central to the work undertaken by Northern Ireland's community and voluntary sector is the ability to find solutions to key challenges and develop supportive mechanisms that meet local needs. Greater investment into delivery infrastructure could strengthen effective collaboration to deliver meaningful change.
4. The successful Community Partnership Fund recipient will identify and support smaller grassroots organisations who do not traditionally access funding opportunities, helping them through the entire funding process from idea generation through to identifying opportunities and supporting them with project delivery.
5. While grant funding may be used to prepare grassroots organisations for any grant, Round 3 of the Connect Fund will open later this year, with funding available for FY27/28 and FY28/29.
6. This document is a call for applications and sets out:
 - a. objectives for the programme; and
 - b. the criteria against which applications will be assessed.

2. Overview of Community Partnership Fund

Programme objectives

The Community Partnership Fund programme will award up to £1m between April 2026 and March 2029 to establish a partnership which can develop a capacity-building offer for harder-to-reach grassroots organisations in Northern Ireland. The successful partnership will act as a forum that can identify and provide comprehensive guidance to smaller community groups that operate informally, are based in rural areas, fall below the radar of traditional funding, or lack the confidence to engage with established institutions and networks. The forum aims ultimately to empower groups to think bigger and act more ambitiously for their communities by supporting them to generate bold ideas, successfully navigate funding opportunities, and build long-term financial resilience.

This grant is designed to complement existing provision, not duplicate programming already delivered in Northern Ireland. Applicants are welcome to propose a new programme which does not currently reflect programming available, or to propose programming which will enhance or add to current programming delivered in Northern Ireland. Where projects build on existing provision, applications must demonstrate how their proposed programme will enhance the reach, depth and/or impact of current provision, and sit alongside other support opportunities. All applicants are required to set out the benefits which will arise for individuals and organisations in the community and voluntary sector as a result of their proposed programming, with reference to how the proposal will fill a gap in support.

Applications for the forum are welcomed from established voluntary and community sector organisations, civic society, and national representative bodies who can demonstrate that they have formed a partnership with other sector leaders to develop and deliver a unified offer for the sector. One organisation must act as Head Recipient for financial accountability and that organisation must be based in Northern Ireland. Other organisations may be based in GB.

Applicants must include a three-year delivery plan, detailing the methods, topics and design of support they propose. At a minimum, applicants must detail proposals which will deliver on the following key objectives:

- **Engaging smaller grassroots groups:** Identifying and supporting smaller grassroots community groups that are currently below the radar of traditional funding;
- **Building Networks:** Creating crucial networking opportunities to help these organisations form new contacts;
- **Fostering Ambition:** Empowering groups to generate ambitious ideas and pursue larger-scale projects and funding; and
- **Navigating Funding:** Providing comprehensive support to help groups identify opportunities and guide them from initial idea generation through to final project delivery, while building financial resilience to manage funding transitions and secure long-term sustainability.

Applicant Eligibility

Applications are welcome from established voluntary and community sector organisations, civic society, and national representative bodies. Applicants must be formally established for public benefit and be not-for-profit organisations

Applicants must demonstrate that they have formed a strong partnership of at least three organisations to develop and deliver a unified offer of support.

One organisation must be identified as the Head Recipient to hold financial accountability and enter into the grant agreement with the Northern Ireland Office. Funding will be awarded to the Head Recipient to support the collaborative activities set out in an application. The Head Recipient must be based and operate in Northern Ireland.

The Head Recipient group must demonstrate a minimum of five years of operations and experience in the community and voluntary sector. Other groups within the

applicant partnership must demonstrate a minimum of two years of experience, in order to offer combined breadth and depth of subject matter expertise.

We cannot accept applications from: individuals or sole traders, organisations based outside the UK, companies who pay profits to directors, shareholders or members, including companies limited by shares. Please note this list is not exhaustive.

Organisations already involved in the provision of support to the community and voluntary sector are eligible to apply, but must demonstrate that funding will be specific to activities conducted for the purpose of the Community Partnership Fund. Funding will not be provided for programming which is already resourced through alternative funding sources, though will be considered in circumstances where this support would be expanded in terms of reach or depth.

Applications are welcomed which outline a three-year programme which aims to establish a partnership of sector organisations supporting the development and capacity of harder-to-reach, grassroots organisations in Northern Ireland, including those operating informally or in rural areas.

Programme Eligibility

The proposed programme must detail how it will deliver on the four key criteria of the fund:

- *Engaging smaller grassroots groups* by acting as a forum so they do not have to navigate multiple providers.
- *Building networks* to help these groups form new contacts.
- *Fostering ambition* by supporting idea generation for larger-scale projects.
- *Navigating funding* by upskilling leaders to find, apply for, and manage funding opportunities (including the Connect Fund) and build financial resilience.

Applications must include a three-year delivery plan, detailing the methods, topics, and design of the support they propose. Please note, it is intended that Year 1 will act as a Development Year, used to establish the forum's infrastructure, solidify the partnership, and design the specific programming for delivery in Years 2 and 3.

Budget must be allocated across the three years of the programme and must not exceed the maximum funding available per round: Up to £300,000 in Year 1 (2026/27 - Development Year); Up to £300,000 in Year 2 (2027/28); and Up to £400,000 in Year 3 (2028/29).

Proposals must clearly demonstrate how funding will be balanced between the management of the partnership and the direct delivery of support, showcasing how the collective expertise of the partnership delivers economies of scale.

Proposals must demonstrate how the forum will provide critical support to all community groups and organisations in Northern Ireland that are lacking in capacity, regardless of their constitutional outlook. Proposals must ensure that the support offer is accessible to the breadth of communities across Northern Ireland.

Proposals must demonstrate the capability to deliver technical training (e.g., on grant applications, leadership development, governance, or project management) across the region.

Further programme eligibility criteria include:

- Activities are not restricted by location but should be flexible to support the access needs of grassroots community and voluntary sector organisations across Northern Ireland.
- Proposals can include requests for funding to hire subject matter experts as contractors to support the delivery of programming. However, any funds allocated for this purpose must be proportionate to the maximum value of the funding available.
- Applications from singular organisations are not eligible.

- Proposals must adhere to the Travel & Subsistence Guidance (see Annex B).
- Applications must demonstrate compliance with relevant legislative requirements in respect of employment, health and safety, discrimination and equality of opportunity.
- Organisations already in receipt of UKG funding are eligible to apply.
- If applying as a non-statutory body, applicants must have a governing document (e.g. constitution or memorandum and articles of association) which includes appropriate statements on members, Directors or Trustees not benefiting financially from the organisation or its dissolution, a minimum of 3 unrelated people on the committee, this will be unrelated trustees for charities and unrelated directors for companies limited by guarantee, and have your own bank account (which requires 2 signatories).
- If working with children, young people or vulnerable adults, you will need to have a safeguarding policy in place that explains how they will be safe.

We retain the right to review and revise eligibility and criteria ahead of subsequent rounds of funding.

Funding

The Community Partnership Fund provides up to £1m over three years to a forum of established voluntary and community sector organisations. This partnership will create a centralised support package to empower grassroots community groups to think bigger and act more ambitiously in the ideas they generate

Funding will be provided in line with the following schedule. Applicants should consider the funding breakdown in the design of their proposed programme:

Financial Year	Total Funding Available
2026/27 (Development Year)	Up to £300,000

2027/28	Up to £300,000
2028/29	Up to £400,000

Funding can be provided for:

- Programme management and direct delivery costs directly associated with running the forum's capacity-building activities and delivering the programme objectives.
- Staffing Costs where directly ascribable to the delivery of the programme.
- A fixed cost of no more than 10% in Years 1 and 2 and 5% in Year 3 for core organisational operating costs including rent, electricity, heat, internet provision etc. Organisations wishing to avail of funding for core operating costs must demonstrate that duplicate funding is not being received from other sources.

Funding cannot be:

- Funding cannot be used for capital costs
- Funding cannot be carried across Financial Years. Funding received in Year 1 must be fully drawn down and spent during 2026/27 and so forth.
- Applications cannot be accepted from individuals, sole traders, organisations based outside the UK, or companies that pay profits to directors, shareholders, or members
- Please note, this list of ineligible costs and criteria is not exhaustive.

3. Applying for the Community Partnership Fund

How to apply

To apply, you must submit an application form, budget/delivery plan tool (as provided on gov.uk), accounts, and a governing document (if applying as a non-statutory body) to community.projects@nio.gov.uk by **5pm Friday 19 June 2026**. Applications submitted after this deadline will not be accepted.

Please refer to the FAQs document for any questions. If not answered, you can email the team at community.projects@nio.gov.uk. Please allow 5 working days for a response. Please ensure all queries are submitted by 5pm on Friday 12 June 2026; the Community Partnership Fund Team cannot guarantee response after this date.

Criteria and assessment

The Community Partnership Fund will provide £1,000,000 over the course of 3 years to a single delivery organisation acting as Head Recipient of a forum of organisations.

Applications will be assessed on the demonstration of the below criteria:

Criteria	The strongest applications will
[1] Capability, Experience and Forum Make-up	Demonstrate Head Recipient has 5 years and constituent groups within the partnership have a minimum of 2 years of experience delivering support directly to the community and voluntary sector. Demonstrate a strong structural capacity to manage and deliver a grant-funded programme of this scale. Show that the forum constituents offer a combined breadth and depth of subject matter expertise
[2] Programme Design	Provide a strong 3-year delivery plan and timeline, clearly outlining the goals for the Year 1 Development Year and noting the stipulated increase in funding available in Year 3.

	<p>Show clarity across the programme's aims, activities, and intended outcomes.</p> <p>Provide a clear allocation of the budget across the 3 years of delivery.</p> <p>Identify potential delivery risks and how they will be mitigated.</p>
[3] Reach and Inclusivity of Delivery	<p>Articulate a strategy and commitment to identifying and building relationships with harder-to-reach grassroots and voluntary organisations, particularly those operating informally or below the radar of traditional funding.</p> <p>State the number of organisations the forum proposes to support each year and how your plan genuinely benefits grassroots groups.</p>
[4] Impact and Outcomes	<p>Identify clear indicators of success (e.g., the number of organisations partaking, geographic reach, benefits gained, beneficiary satisfaction) and methods for monitoring them.</p> <p>Demonstrate an agile approach to delivery that allows for continuous improvement across successive years.</p> <p>Demonstrate how improvements to the sector's capacity, ambition, and ability to access funds will be sustained beyond the immediate 3-year delivery period.</p>
[5] Value for Money	<p>Demonstrate that the budget is appropriate, well-justified, and represents good value for the scale and impact of the programming offered.</p> <p>Adhere to the financial schedule and compliance rules.</p> <p>Demonstrate how funding will be effectively balanced between the management of the forum itself and the direct delivery of support to groups.</p>

	Prove that the grant offers good value by maximising the collective expertise of the partnership to deliver economies of scale.
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Further detail on how to evidence objectives is set out below.

Objectives	The strongest applications will
Engaging smaller grassroots groups: identifying and supporting smaller grassroots community groups that are currently below the radar of traditional funding.	<p>Evidence of a clear and proactive strategy for identifying and reaching out to smaller, informal, or rural grassroots groups that lack the confidence to engage with established institutions.</p> <p>Demonstrate how the forum will function effectively as a centralised partnership, ensuring these groups do not have to navigate multiple providers.</p>
Building networks: Creating crucial networking opportunities to help organisations form new contacts.	<p>Demonstrate structured plans to facilitate meaningful networking opportunities between grassroots organisations and wider sector leaders.</p> <p>Encourage collaboration and peer support that helps smaller groups form new, lasting networks to share best practice, resources, and solutions to shared challenges.</p>
Fostering ambition: Empowering groups to generate ambitious ideas and pursue larger-scale projects and funding.	<p>Provide clear methods for empowering grassroots leaders to generate bold, ambitious ideas tailored to their local community's needs.</p> <p>Show how the proposed support will build the confidence and capacity of these groups to scale up their activities and pursue larger-scale transformational projects.</p>
Navigating funding: Providing comprehensive support to help groups identify funding opportunities and guide from initial idea generation through to final project delivery, while building financial resilience to manage funding transitions and secure long-term sustainability.	<p>Detail comprehensive guidance on how groups can be supported from initial idea generation through to finding and applying for funding opportunities (including the Connect Fund).</p> <p>Demonstrate clear strategies to upskill community leaders in financial management, governance, and project delivery to build long-term financial resilience and secure sustainability.</p>

Applicants must score a minimum of 50/75 and meet the minimum scoring value set per criterion to be invited to interview.

Criteria	Detail	Max Score
[1] Capability, Experience and Forum Make-up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A minimum of 5 years experience for Head Recipient and 2 years experience for constituent groups in delivering support directly to the community and voluntary sector ● Applicant forum's structure and capacity to manage and deliver a grant funded programme ● Forum demonstrates a mix of experience offering combined breadth of subject matter expertise; ● Constituents individually offer depth and breadth of experience 	<p>15 (Min for award = 10)</p>
[2] Programme Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Demonstrate how well the project aligns with the stated objectives and the strength of its proposed contribution. ● Strength of programme design including a 3 year delivery plan and timeline, noting the Year 1 Development Year and stipulated increase in funding in Year 3 ● Methods of delivery, topics of support and how they meet the four key areas stipulated ● Clarity across programme's aims, activities, timeline and intended outcomes ● Allocation of budget across 3 years of delivery, noting the stipulated increase in funding in Year 3 ● Identification of delivery risks and how the same will be mitigated 	<p>25 (Min for award = 20)</p>

<p>[3] Reach and inclusivity of Delivery</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strategy for and commitment to identifying and relationship building with grassroots community groups ● Strength of plan to ensure suggested offer delivers for harder-to-reach grassroots and voluntary organisations, particularly those operating informally or below the radar of traditional funding ● Number of organisations forum proposes to support per year 	<p>15</p>
<p>[4] Impact and Outcomes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identification of indicators of success and methods for monitoring e.g., the number of organisations partaking, geographic reach, benefits gained, beneficiary satisfaction. ● Evidence of an agile approach to deliver which allows for continuous improvement across successive years of delivery. ● Sustainability of improvements to the community and voluntary sector's ambition of goals, capacity, and improved sector ability to access funds beyond the immediate delivery period. 	<p>10</p>
<p>[5] Value for Money</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Demonstration that the budget is appropriate, well justified and represents good value for the scale and impact of programming offered. ● Adherence to the financial schedule, and compliance with eligibility rules. ● Demonstrate how funding will be balanced between forum management and direct training delivery against the aim of the programme. ● Demonstrate that the grant offers better value than a siloed approach by maximising collective expertise to deliver economies of scale. 	<p>10</p> <p>(Min for award = 8)</p>
	<p>Total</p>	<p>75</p>

Following application assessment, applicant organisations who achieve the required minimum score of 50/75 will be invited to participate in an interview. **It is anticipated that interviews will be held in July 2026.**

ANNEX A: TRAVEL AND SUBSISTENCE POLICY

Any requested travel and subsistence must meet the following conditions. It is possible to provide provisional quotes in your application, granted the final costs are no higher than the following:

AIR TRAVEL

First class travel and business class travel is not permitted. Air miles and similar benefits earned through official travel should not be used for private purposes.

ACCOMMODATION

As far as possible, you should try to prioritise day trips. If that is not possible, you must ensure your overnight accommodation meets the following rates:

		Green	Amber
Overnight Accommodation	London	£125.00	£250.00
	Elsewhere	£87.00	£110.00

You are encouraged to find accommodation within the green rate but may use the amber rate if absolutely necessary, keeping value for money in mind.

SUBSISTENCE ALLOWANCE

Subsistence allowances	Period of absence	Limit
Day (not to be claimed when a meal is provided)	Over 5 hours, up to and including 10 hours	£4.25
Day (limit reduces by £4.25 when a meal is provided, not to be claimed when two meals are provided)	Over 10 hours, up to and including 12 hours	£9.30

Day (start prior to 7.30am) (limited reduced by £4.25 when a meal is provided, £9.30 when two meals are provided and not to be claimed when three meals are provided)	Over 12 hours, up to and including 15 hours	£13.55
24 hour (Daily rate) (limit reduces by £4.25 where lunch is provided and £13.55 is evening meal is provided)	24 hours	£25.00

ANNEX B: ELIGIBLE ITEM REQUESTS & FUNDING PARAMETERS

The following provides guidance for prospective Community Partnership Fund applicants on funding items which are ineligible and those which are eligible and appropriate for the consideration of funding, alongside any parameters which are in place.

This guidance does not seek to outline all eligible funding items, and specific queries should be directed to: community.projects@nio.gov.uk

Ineligible Funding Items

Ineligible Items	Notes
Alcohol	The purchase of alcohol is not eligible for funding. Applicants wishing to purchase alcohol as part of group meals should be mindful that these costs will not be covered by granted funds.
Capital Costs	Capital costs are not eligible for funding.
Marketing, Communications or PR-based activities	Items in this category which are central to successful project delivery e.g., recruitment of participants will be considered. Applicants should note the necessity of such funded items in their written application

Eligible and Appropriate Funding Items

Eligible Items	Notes
Accessibility Aids	Applicants are welcome to include costs which ensure the accessibility of their project to a wide-range of participants. This includes but is not limited to, costs associated with the provision of portable loop systems, screen readers, mobility aids, creation of accessible document formats and/or supporting caring responsibilities.

Accommodation	<p>Applicants are welcome to include the costs of accommodation for project participants. Accommodation rates are subject to the Travel & Subsistence Policy.</p> <p>Applicants requesting funding for accommodation within the amber rates should give justification for the requirement for funding of this value.</p> <p>Where costs for accommodation exceed limits outlined in the Travel & Subsistence policy, the team reserves the right to restrict funding allocated to this item.</p> <p>If successful, it is recommended that applicants make accommodation bookings immediately following confirmation of grant award to ensure the lowest costs possible.</p>
Advertising for Project Recruitment	<p>Applicants are welcome to include the costs of advertising where advertising is pertinent to the successful delivery of the proposed project. This includes but is not limited to the recruitment of project participants or project staff.</p>
Consultancy Fees	<p>Applicants are welcome to hire for-profit individuals / organisations on a consultancy basis to support the delivery of their proposed project. Details should be provided on the purpose for hiring for-profit individuals / organisations in the Activity Outline section of the application, with associated costs noted in the Resourcing and Costs section.</p>
Core Operational Costs	<p>Fixed cost of no more than 10% in Years 1 and 2 and 5% in Year 3 for core organisational operating costs including rent, electricity, heat, internet provision etc. Organisations wishing to avail of funding for core operating costs must demonstrate that duplicate funding is not being received from other sources.</p>

Data Collection and Analysis / Evaluation and Reporting	Applicants are welcome to include costs associated with the collection, monitoring and analysis of data related to the core content of the project and/or the monitoring, evidencing and evaluation of project delivery and impact.
Equipment Rental	Applicants are welcome to rent specific equipment required for the successful delivery of the proposed project.
Project Materials / Printing	Applicants are welcome to include costs associated with producing project materials and printables which are central to the successful delivery of the proposed project and/or necessary to enhance the accessibility of the project for participants. Applicants should state the number of materials/printables which will be sought through the funding request to assess Value for Money.
Report Printing	Applicants are welcome to include costs associated with producing and printing reports on their project, on the condition that reports will be used to evidence best-practice or extend learning from the project. Applicants should state the cost of report design and the number of prints which will be sought through the funding request to assess Value for Money.
Staff Costs	Applicants are welcome to include costs associated with staff time which is directly attributable to the project. Applicants should breakdown staff costs by individual, stating the number of hours which will be contributed by said individual to the proposed project, the rate of pay per hour, and the total cost requested per individual. Further information on how to display staff costs is included in the example budget tool.
Subsistence (Food, Catering, Meals)	Applicants are welcome to include the costs of subsistence for project participants. Subsistence rates are subject to the Travel & Subsistence

	<p>Policy. Where costs for subsistence exceed limits outlined in the Travel & Subsistence policy, the team reserves the right to restrict funding allocated to this item.</p> <p>For the purposes of the Fund, subsistence relates directly to the provision of food, catering and meals and is not intended to be used to ‘pay’ individuals for their participation.</p> <p>Applicants should note that a maximum of £25 per participant per day can be requested. This includes the cost of all food, catering or meals requested.</p>
Technology and Software Licenses	<p>Applicants are welcome to include costs associated with acquiring/maintaining licenses associated with technology or software, on the condition that said technology or software is required for the successful delivery of the proposed project and not used for any means other than those associated with the proposed project. This includes but is not limited to Canva, Microsoft Office, Skype, Zoom etc.</p>
Travel	<p>Applicants are welcome to include the costs of travel for project participants. Applicants should breakdown travel costs by incidence, travel method, cost per participant, and total cost to allow for the assessment of Value for Money.</p> <p>If successful, it is recommended that applicants make travel bookings immediately following confirmation of grant award to ensure the lowest costs possible.</p>
Venue Hire	<p>Applicants are welcome to include the costs of Venue Hire to facilitate the delivery of their proposed project.</p> <p>Where hired venues will provide catering / refreshments, the costs of said catering / refreshments must be deducted from the total</p>

	<p>subsistence rate requested per participant in attendance.</p> <p>If successful, it is recommended that applicants make venue bookings immediately following confirmation of grant award to ensure the lowest costs possible.</p> <p>Please note, costs associated with hiring space within applicant-owned buildings are not eligible for funding in line with guidelines relating to core operational costs.</p>
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