Northern Ireland Office

CONNECT FUND

Application guidance

July 2025

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1. Introduction

1. The Connect Fund provides up to £2.55m to strengthen civic East-West collaboration on matters of shared interest, including mutual challenges and opportunities across a range of sectors that directly affect communities in Northern Ireland.

2. Central to the work undertaken by Northern Ireland's community and voluntary sector is the need for collaboration and partnership. There are many great interventions in this space, with the sector at the heart of delivering on behalf of local communities.

3. Through the Connect Fund, we want to connect the great ideas, people and solutions in Northern Ireland with those across the United Kingdom to address mutual challenges and grasp shared opportunities.

4. The Connect Fund will run for four years and provide up to £2.55 million to fund proposals that promote civic East West collaboration and directly have a positive impact on communities in Northern Ireland.

5. The Government supports an inclusive United Kingdom, and that includes extending opportunities for collaboration beyond the political and into the civic space to better improve the lives of all communities in Northern Ireland.

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 the Connect Fund

Programme objectives

The Connect Fund awards up to £2.55m to strengthen civic East-West collaboration on matters of shared interest, including mutual challenges and opportunities across a range of sectors that directly affect communities in Northern Ireland. The Government supports an inclusive United Kingdom and acknowledges the importance of bringing together community groups across the United Kingdom to better improve the lives of all communities in Northern Ireland. The Connect Fund will connect the great ideas, people and solutions in Northern Ireland with those across the United Kingdom to address mutual challenges and grasp shared opportunities.

Applications **must** have a clear East-West lens and deliver on one or more of the following objectives:

- Strengthen East-West connections by developing long lasting civic relationships;
- Propose an original approach to developing East-West connections;
- Support the development of cultural, sports and people-to-people links;
- Build leadership capability opportunities for community leaders on an East-West basis; or
- Facilitate positive and constructive dialogue on shared opportunities/challenges facing communities in the UK.

Eligibility

Applications are welcome from the voluntary and community sector, civic society and national representative bodies including for underrepresented voices. Applicants must be formally established for public benefit and not-for-profit organisations. You can apply if your organisation is a voluntary or community organisation, registered charity, constituted group or club, not-for-profit company or Community Interest Company or a statutory body.

The Connect Fund will support East-West engagement and applications can be submitted for both standalone activities and also longer term proposals that facilitate ongoing engagement between civic organisations on a national and sectoral level. Funding can also be requested to enhance pre-existing projects taking place on an East-West basis or to establish new opportunities for engagement.

Capital costs and core operation costs would not be eligible for funding under the scheme. We also 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, organisations that have an ongoing application, or applications funding religious activity. Please note this list is not exhaustive. Staffing costs can be considered at the maximum of 20% of the total project cost where directly ascribable to the delivery of a project. Further information of eligibility can be found on Supporting Information.

Applicants should proactively consider accessibility for participants of all backgrounds and abilities, and may include accessibility and inclusion expenses in their project budget.

Further eligibility criteria includes:

- Proposals must demonstrate that the activities directly benefit Northern Ireland. Activities are not restricted by location and can occur in NI or GB provided stakeholders from Northern Ireland are involved;
- GB applicants must be engaging with a partner in NI as part of their project/proposal.
- NI applicants are not required to have a GB partner, particularly if the proposal is for a standalone activity; for example, attending a conference. However it is strongly recommended that NI applicants include a GB partner if their project is premised on engagement with GB organisations.
- NI applicants must be engaging with a partner in GB as part of their project/proposal (exceptions may be accepted if proposal is for a standalone activity; for example, attending a conference);

- Applications from national representative bodies must engage with partners/organisations in both NI and GB;
- Organisations may only submit one application for funding in Round 3 of the Connect Fund (this means that organisations can only be lead applicant in one application at a time);
- Organisations already in receipt of UKG funding are eligible to apply for this grant; and
- Compliance with relevant legislative requirements in respect of employment, health and safety, discrimination and equality of opportunity.
- If applying as a non-statutory body, you 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).

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

If you'll be working with children, young people or vulnerable adults, you will need to have a safeguarding policy in place that explains how they'll be safe.

While the Fund supports organisations collaborating with counterparts on an East-West basis, grants will be awarded to one lead organisation to support the collaborative activities set out in an application.

Funding

The Connect Fund provides up to £2.55m over four years to strengthen civic East-West collaboration on matters of shared interest, including mutual challenges and opportunities across a range of sectors that directly affect communities in Northern Ireland.

This is Round 3 of funding, and will deliver up to £500,000:

Round	**Total**
Round 1: 2025/26	Up to £500,000
Round 2: 2026/27	Up to £550,000
Round 3: 2027/28	Up to £500,000
Round 4: 2028/29	Up to £1,000,000

Applicants can bid for projects from £300 to £50,000. Funding can be provided for both standalone/one off projects (e.g. attending a conference or facilitating a visit) or for a more recurrent project (e.g. establishing a UK-wide forum for community organisations). Funding, however, cannot be carried across rounds. That means the funding bid for Round 3 must be fully drawn down and spent during 2027/28.

Round 3 will be open from 2 November 2026 - until 17:00pm 18 December 2026 and project delivery will run from 1 April 2027 to 31 March 2028.

3. Applying for the Connect Fund

Criteria and assessment

The Connect Fund will offer funding from £300 to £50,000.

Applications will be assessed based on how well they demonstrate the following:

Criteria	The strongest applications will
Relevance to objectives	Demonstrate how well the project aligns with one or more of the stated objectives and the strength of its proposed contribution. **For continuation or follow-on proposals:** Demonstrates exceptional strategic progression; proves how this phase leverages past success to achieve systemic or long-term impact, significantly scaling reach, embedding self-sustaining community connections, or unlocking transformational outcomes.
Impact and Outcomes	Demonstrate clarity of expected outcomes and how they will be measured; evidence potential for lasting impact on East-West relations and civic collaboration; outline clear evaluation measures. **For continuation or follow-on proposals:** Outlines clear cumulative impact; demonstrates how this funding leverages past momentum to embed lasting, self-sustaining outcomes and systemic benefits across communities.
Feasibility and Capacity	Evidence ability to deliver the project successfully and demonstrate strength of project planning, including timeline, budget and risk management.
Clarity and quality of proposal	Clearly outline the project's aims, activities, timeline and intended outcomes and articulate the rationale for the project, ensuring it is grounded in evidence or community need.
Value for money & Deliverability	Provide a clear breakdown of the expected costs incurred; demonstrate clearly how funding will be utilised to deliver the expected objectives; demonstrate an appropriate

	budget which is well justified and represents good value for the scale and potential impact of the project. **For all returning applicants:** Previous evidence of excellent financial management with zero unexcused variance, optimal drawdown of funds, and exceptional delivery governance.

Further detail on how to evidence objectives is set out below.

Objectives	**The strongest applications will**
Strengthen East-West connections by developing long lasting civic relationships	Evidence that the project deepens existing or builds new civic relationships on an East-West basis. Demonstrate plans for sustaining those relationships between the life of the project.
Proposes an original approach to developing East-West connections.	Demonstrate originality or creativity in methods for building East-West relations. Show potential for lasting impact on East-West relations and civic collaboration. Perhaps make use of new technologies, models or practices that could be scaled or replicated.
Facilitate positive and constructive dialogue on shared opportunities/challenges facing communities in the UK.	Evidence how you will facilitate meaningful engagement and cooperation between groups in Northern Ireland and GB. Evidence and clarity on role and contributions from groups including how you would identify them.
Build leadership capability opportunities for community leaders on an East-West basis.	Demonstrate clear strategies to build leadership capacity across communities in Northern Ireland and GB. Encourage shared learning, peer support or mentoring that strengthens civic leadership on a UK wide basis. Contributes to long-term leadership networks that support cooperation, inclusion and innovation in East-West relations.

Support the development of cultural, sports and people-to-people links.	Build meaningful and lasting connections through shared cultural, sporting, artistic or community-based initiatives on an East-West basis. Foster mutual understanding, trust and respect between individuals and communities from different traditions and backgrounds. Prioritise inclusive participation and celebrate diversity of identities across the UK.

Criteria	**Maximum score**
Relevance to objectives *Assess how well the project aligns with one or more of the stated programme objectives and the strength of its proposed contribution*	15
Impact and Outcomes *Evaluate the potential scale, depth and sustainability of project's outcomes, including how they will be measured*	10
Feasibility and Capacity *Does the organisation have the ability to deliver based on their experience, resources, partnerships and a realistic project plan*	10
Clarity and quality of proposal *Assess how clearly and compellingly the project is presented, including coherence between aims, activities and outcomes*	10
Value for money *Assess whether the budget is appropriate, efficient and proportionate to the proposed impact*	5
Total	50

You must score at least 30/50 total *and* a minimum of 4/5 on value for money to be eligible for funding.

ANNEX A: ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

The table below provides an illustrative list of example projects that could be funded under the Connect Fund. This list is not exhaustive and bids will be assessed on its own merits and ability to satisfy the criteria outlined in the application. Guarantees cannot be made that bids of the nature demonstrated in the below table will be recipients of any funding.

Theme	**Project**
Arts & Culture	Children's youth project reimagining a mural (working together virtually and then facilitating a visit to paint a mural together)
Arts & Culture	Shared orchestra/musical performance between musicians in NI and GB
Arts & Culture	Cultural Exchange and hosting of performance and education programmes in NI (e.g. artists from GB attending Belfast Mela or Orange Order lodges visiting the Museum of Orange Heritage)
Community relations	Funding NI attendance at a conference in GB
Community relations	Funding youth workers from NI to exchange with counterparts in GB to share best practice on shared challenges (e.g. supporting newcomer communities and tackling racism; Funding a guided visit from a community group in the North of England to NI to share best practice on, for example, supporting communities in the aftermath of terror attacks
Sports	Funding sporting competitions for youth on a UK-wide basis
General	Funding youth competitions on a UK wide basis (e.g. robotics, chess etc) for disadvantaged youth represented by community groups
All	Funding the establishment of forums to facilitate E/W discussions on matters of shared interest (e.g. racism, women in peace and reconciliation, the environment)
All	Funding Knowledge, Skills and Leadership exchanges on shared challenges and opportunities (suicide prevention, film skills, cybersecurity, education)

ANNEX B: 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

There is a ban on all first class travel and on business class travel. Air miles and similar benefits earned through official travel should not be used for private purposes.

ACCOMODATION

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 Accomodation	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. If you use the amber rating, your application value for money score will be unable to score above a 4.

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