Northern Ireland Office

Connect Fund: Round 3

Introduction to Fund and Fund Guidance

Northern Ireland Office

Agenda

- Introduction to Fund and Objectives
- Funding Window and Timeline
- Applicant / Project / Funding Item Eligibility
- Application Forms & Scoring
- Key Tips for Applicants

Introduction to Fund and Objectives

- **The Connect Fund provides funding 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 Connect Fund will 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.**

- **The Connect Fund will provide up to £500,000 to fund proposals in 2027/28FY. Proposals must be between £300 - £50,000.**

Continued

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

Round 3 Funding Window and Timeline

- **Round 3 of the Connect Fund will run from 1st April 2027 - 31st March 2028**
- **Applications for Round 3 of the Connect Fund are now open**



* Note: All timelines are indicative and subject to operational review.

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Applicant, Project & Funding Item Eligibility

Applicant Eligibility

- **Applicants must be formally established for public benefit and not-for-profit organisations e.g., community or voluntary organisation, charity, constituted group or club, non-for-profit companies or statutory bodies.**

- **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, but it is recommended if their project is premised on engagement with GB organisations;**

- **Applications from national representative bodies must engage with partners/organisations in both NI and GB;**

Project Eligibility

- **Applicants can apply for project funding from £300 to £50,000.**

- **Funding can be provided for:**
  - **standalone/one off projects;**
  - **Recurrent or longer-term projects; or**
  - **To deliver pre-existing projects, on the condition that evidence is provided to highlight how the Connect Fund will support the enhancement or development of the pre-existing project.**

- **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.**

Funding Item Eligibility

- **Guidelines on eligible funding item requests are available on the Connect Fund page at Gov.UK Find a Grant**
- **Capital costs and core operation costs are not be eligible for funding.**
- **Marketing, Communications or PR-based activities will only be considered were central to successful project delivery e.g., recruitment of participants.**
- **Staffing costs can be considered where directly ascribable to the delivery of a project. Staff costs will be capped at a maximum of 20% of the total funding requested**
- **Travel, accommodation and subsistence are subject to pre-set guidelines.**

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Application Forms & Scoring

Application Forms

- **All applications require:**
  - **Activity outline: A summary of the proposed project and how funding will support the proposed objectives for the grant;**
  - **Project plan: An outline of the project delivery plan including key milestones, activities and timelines.**
  - **Delivery Plan & Budget: A project budget breaking down the total amount of funding sought, aligned to a delivery plan with key milestones, activities and timelines.**
  - **Monitoring and Evaluation: A summary of the benefits which the project is working to deliver, the baseline from which the project will build, tools for measuring same.**

Application Scoring

- **To be eligible to receive funding, applicants to the Connect Fund must score a minimum of 30/50 overall and a minimum of 4/5 in Value for Money**

  - **Relevance to Objectives (15 Points)**
    The strongest applications will demonstrate how well the project aligns with one or more of the stated objectives and the strength of its proposed contribution.

    <u>For continuation or follow-on proposals:</u>
    The strongest applications will demonstrates strategic progression.

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

Continued

- **Impact and Outcomes (10 Points)**
  The strongest applications will 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.

  <u>For continuation or follow-on proposals:</u>
  The strongest applications will demonstrates how this funding leverages past momentum.

- **Feasibility and Capability (10 Points)**
  The strongest applications will evidence ability to deliver the project successfully and demonstrate strength of project planning, including timeline, budget and risk management.

Continued

- **Clarity and Quality (10 Points)**
  The strongest applications will 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 (5 Points)**
  The strongest applications will 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.

  <u>For all returning applicants:</u>
  The strongest applications will: Have previous evidence of excellent financial management and optimal drawdowns

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Key Tips for Applicants

Application and Budget

Illustrating Relevance to Objectives

- **Design your project with 1 or more Connect Fund objectives in mind and state these explicitly in your application.**

Objective	Suggested Evidence
Strengthen East-West connections by developing long lasting civic relationships	• Evidence how the project will deepen civic relationships on an East-West basis i.e., through what methods? • Demonstrate plans for sustaining relationships.
Propose an original approach to developing East-West connections;	• Demonstrate how and why the approach is original. • Demonstrate the potential for lasting impact.
Support the development of cultural, sports and people-to-people links;	• Evidence how the project will build meaningful and lasting connections. • Demonstrate how mutual understand, trust and respect will be promoted.
Build leadership capability opportunities for community leaders on an East-West basis;	• Demonstrate clear strategies to build leadership capacity. • Demonstrate contribution to long-term leadership networks.
Facilitate positive and constructive dialogue on shared opportunities/challenges facing communities in the UK.	• Evidence how the project will facilitate meaningful engagement and dialogue. • Evidence group contributions, including how you would identify them.

Project Delivery Plans

- **Application: Applicants should provide as much detail as possible about their project, including 1) project start and end dates, 2) key activities, and 3) timelines within the written application 4) separately complete the Delivery Plan and Budget Management Tool Template.**

- **This template supports applicants to identify key project milestones, to assign tasks to partners, and to highlight when key tasks will be delivered.**

- **A Digital Delivery Plan and Budget Management Tool Guide for Round 3 of the Connect Fund is available on the Connect Fund page at Gov.UK Find a Grant**

Project Delivery Plan Example

Delivery Plan			Apr-26					May-26			
Key Milestones	**Lead**	**Support**	**w/c 1st**	**w/c 6th**	**w/c 13th**	**w/c 20th**	**w/c 27th**	**w/c 3rd**	**w/c 10th**	**w/c 17th**	**w/c 24th**
Milestone 1: Recruiting Participants											
Meet with partners to agree application criteria	Organisation A	Partner B / Partner C									
Create application form	Organisation A										
Share application form on social media	Organisation A										
Review applications	Organisation A	Partner B / Partner C									
Hold interviews	Organisation A	Partner B / Partner C									
Alert successful applicants	Organisation A										
Milestone 2: Bookings and Arrangements											
Book flights, travel and accommodation for Cardiff conference	Organisation A										
Book flights, travel and accommodation for In-Person Workshop 1 (Northern Ireland)	Organisation A										
Book flights, travel and accommodation for In-Person Workshop 2 (Glasgow)	Organisation A	Partner B									
Book flights, travel and accommodation for In-Person Workshop 3 (London)	Organisation A	Partner C									
Book flights, travel and accommodation for Final Project Meeting (Northern Ireland)	Organisation A										
Milestone 3: Conference											
Travel to Cardiff airport for all partners and participants	Organisation A	Partner B / Partner C									

Illustrating Value for Money

- **Applications must include an appropriate budget, demonstrating an efficient use of money and a proportionate request for funding in line with the proposed impact.**

- **Applicants should:**
  - **Provide a clear breakdown of the expected costs which will be incurred.**
  - **Demonstrate clearly how funding will be utilised to deliver the expected objectives.**
  - **Demonstrate that the budget is appropriate, aligns with Connect Fund guidance, and does not include any ineligible funding requests.**
  - **Provide sufficient justification for each item request.**

Developing a Budget

- **Applicants must separately complete the Delivery Plan and Budget Management Tool Template.**
- **This template supports applicants to detail their funding request.**
- **A Digital Delivery Plan and Budget Management Tool Guide for Round 3 of the Connect Fund is available on the Connect Fund page at Gov.UK Find a Grant and UK.GOV Connect Fund page**

Budget Tool

	June / July 2026	September / October 2026	December 2026 / January 2027	March 2027	Budget Total 26/27	
Costs						**Notes**
Item Request (overwrite as you see fit)					£0	
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Item Request (overwrite as you see fit)					£0	
Item Request (overwrite as you see fit)					£0	
Item Request (overwrite as you see fit)					£0	
TOTAL Non-Staff costs	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0	

Budget Tool

Costs	June / July 2026	September / October 2026	December 2026 / January 2027	March 2027	Budget Total 26/27	Notes
Car parking at Belfast City Airport		£120			£120	£30 per car per day for 2 cars = £120
Flights (Belfast-Cardiff return)		£800			£800	£100 per person return; 7 participants & 1 staff member from Belfast City Airport
Bus (Glasgow City - Glasgow Airport return)		£110			£110	£22 per person return; 4 participants & 1 staff member from Glasgow Airport
Flights (Glasgow-Cardiff return)		£450			£450	£90 per person return; 4 participants & 1 staff member from Glasgow Airport
Return taxis from Cardiff airport to hotel		£400			£400	4 return taxis at £50 per journey
Train (London - Cardiff)		£1,000			£1,000	£100 per person return; 9 participants & 1 staff member from London Paddington
Accommodation Cardiff		£3,680			£3,680	2 nights per person at Cardiff Hotel; £80 per night w/ breakfast for 23 people
Conference attendance costs		£690			£690	£30 per person for 20 participants & 3 staff members
Subsistence / Meals Costs for 2 days		£920			£920	£20 per person per day for 20 participants & 3 staff members for 2 days

Staff Costs (incl Employers NI, Bonuses & Pension)						Notes
Programme Manager at Organisation A	£960	£960	£960	£960	£3,840	Responsible for Programme Management and Design 16 hours per month at £20 per hour = £3840
Youth Engagement Officer at Organisation B	£160	£128	£96	£96	£480	Responsible for Project Delivery 30 hours across the project at £16 per hour = 480
Youth Engagement Manager at Organisation C	£160	£128	£96	£96	£480	Responsible for Project Delivery 30 hours across the project at £16 per hour = 480
Administration Officer at Organisation A	£462	£126	£126	£126	£840	30 hours of administrative work between April/May 2026 3 hours per month during other months 60 total hours at £14 per hour = £840
Role (overwrite as you see fit)					£0	
TOTAL Staff costs	£1,742	£1,342	£1,278	£1,278	£5,640	

Thank you. Questions?

Connect Fund

- **Visit Gov.uk Find a Grant and search “Connect Fund Round 3”**

- **If you require any further information for your application please contact connectfund@nio.gov.uk**