

Connect Fund to award additional £1.5 million to community and voluntary groups

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Northern Ireland community and voluntary organisations will be able to bid for an additional £1.5 million in grant funding.

- Connect Fund extended for an additional two years, with £1.5 million new funding to be awarded in 2027-2029.
- It comes as 22 applicants are awarded funding from the second round for 2026/27.
- Minister visits group supporting art access for older people and those with dementia.

Northern Ireland community and voluntary organisations will be able to bid for an additional £1.5 million in grant funding, as the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) extends its successful Connect Fund programme for a further two years.

It comes as the NIO awards £550,000 to 22 organisations, strengthening East-West relations by bringing together community and voluntary organisations in Northern Ireland and Great Britain this year and next year through round two of the Connect Fund.

Funding has been awarded to projects improving older people and people who have dementia's access to the arts, as well as projects championing community cohesion.

The Connect Fund supports work in sectors directly affecting Northern Ireland communities, encouraging east-west collaboration across the UK, and equipping local groups to tackle challenges and access opportunities.

One example is the Belfast organisation Arts Care, whose partnership with Equal Arts in Newcastle, England, will increase the range of arts and creative activities for those with dementia in care homes. This will include creating cross-community ceilidh events for care homes and supported living residents, their families and carers. During the visit, the Minister met with Arts Care CEO Barry Macaulay and staff, and enjoyed a 'crankie box' storytelling performance on Belfast's history accompanied by local music, illustrating how the arts can be used to bring back memories and create joy.

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State Matthew Patrick visited Arts Care to discuss their new initiative. He said:

The £1.5 million which we have just announced will be hugely beneficial for many community and voluntary organisations, enabling them to launch and develop projects to benefit communities.

Congratulations also to the 22 fantastic projects which will be separately awarded over £550,000 funding through round two of the Connect Fund.

I am so pleased to hear how this Connect Fund grant will enrich the lives of older people and those with dementia through art, and hope this project brings joy to participants while combatting isolation.

Arts Care CEO Barry Macaulay said:

Arts Care are delighted to be a recipient of the NIO Connect Fund. The funding allows us to work closely with Equal Arts, a similar Creative Health Charity to ourselves, who operate in the North East of England.

Through the project we will host a series of reciprocal visits of staff, artists and participants from both organisations, to share mutual expertise in providing creative health to older people in hospital, residential and community settings with a particular focus on music and dance.

Opportunities to share practice with colleagues and participants in England in this way are very rare and we are very excited at the prospect.

Another organisation that will benefit is Belfast youth charity Springboard, whose project will explore community cohesion strategies for Northern Ireland by learning from organisations in Manchester, London and Bradford.

Executive Director of Springboard Opportunities Steph O'Rourke said:

We are delighted to have been awarded support from the Connect Fund, which will enable us to strengthen partnerships and enhance our practice in ways that directly benefit grassroots communities across Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

This investment will make a significant and lasting difference to the young people we work with.

The latest announcement of a further £1.5 million will enable round three to open for applications later this year, with £500,000 in grant funding available in the 2027/28 financial year, and £1 million for round 4 available during the 2028/29 financial year.

Notes to editors

The full list of 22 organisations receiving funding in the latest award from round two of the Connect Fund are:

- Arts Care Limited
- bBeyond
- Building Communities Resource Centre
- Community Places NI
- Co-operation Ireland
- Easilink Community Transport
- East Belfast Community Development Agency
- Enterprise Causeway
- Environmental Justice Network Ireland
- Go-Woman Alliance Community Interest Company
- Kabosh
- Kilcooley Women's Centre
- Live Music Now

- Newtownbreda Football Club
- Northern Ireland Environment Link
- Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network
- Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group
- Rural Community Network NI
- Schomberg Society Kilkeel Ltd
- Springboard Opportunities Ltd
- The Rainbow Project
- YouthAction

The Connect Fund has so far awarded £1m in grants to 46 projects, directly benefiting organisations across Northern Ireland and Great Britain. A full list of the 46 organisations who have so far benefitted from the Connect Fund is here.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/connect-fund-to-award-additional-15-million-to-community-and-voluntary-groups>