

Rural Investment & Growth Fund 2026-27

Category: Grant to Business

Information for Applicants

Rural Investment & Growth Fund

Guidance Notes 2026-27

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Purpose of grant programme/overview of fund

The Rural Investment & Growth Fund is designed to provide financial assistance to small and micro businesses operating in rural areas, with the objective of developing sustainable growth, enhancing economic resilience and supporting the creation of meaningful employment opportunities.

The Scheme is open for applications from **Monday 13 April 2026** until **midnight Friday 8 May 2026**.

This is a competitive process, and all grants awarded will be determined on the basis of merit. To ensure fairness, transparency, and alignment with funding objectives, applicants are strongly encouraged to read these guidance notes in full before submitting their application. This document outlines the eligibility criteria, the expectations for project design, the assessment framework, and the procedural requirements that govern the grant process. Failure to meet any of these requirements may result in the application being rejected, regardless of the perceived merit of the proposal.

These conditions should be read in conjunction with the Grant Funding Policy.

To be eligible for this grant, your business must meet the following mandatory conditions:

- The business must be legally registered and actively trading for a minimum of 6 months, with its principal place of business located within the Antrim and Newtownabbey rural area. Applicants are responsible for confirming their eligibility under the Councils rural designation.
- The business must be structured as a sole trader, partnership, limited company or social enterprises who have a significant contribution to the economy. Charities, not-for-profit organisations and public sector entities are not eligible. Social enterprises will be assessed on a case-by-case basis depending on economic activity & relevance of the project.
- All project activities must have not yet commenced at the time of application. Any expenditure incurred, including the procurement, placement of orders, signing of contracts or commencement of works, prior to submission of the application will render the application ineligible.
- Match funding must be secured from non-public sources, such as business cash reserves, personal investment or approved business loans. Funding from other public grants, subsidies or state aid programmes cannot be used as match funding.
- All applicants must complete a subsidy control declaration in full, disclosing all state aid received in the last four fiscal years (2022/23 to 2025/26), including but not limited to grants from Invest NI, Intertrade Ireland, GoFortt, Go-Succeed, or the Digital Transformation Flexible Fund. Please note that

payments received under the furlough scheme or the Small Business Grant Scheme (£10,000) do not require declaration.

Failure to meet any of these criteria will result in immediate disqualification. There are no exceptions.

1.2 Level of Grant Fund

The Scheme can provide funding of up to 50% of costs for capital items up to a maximum of £20,000. The minimum grant awarded will be £10,000. The total cost of the capital project must be a minimum of £20,000. All expenditure is based on NET cost. Applicants must provide the remaining match funding for the project.

1.3 Who can apply?

- Must be legally registered and trading for at least 6 months, with the main business location in the Antrim and Newtownabbey rural area (applicants must confirm rural eligibility).
- Eligible business types: sole trader, partnership, limited company, or social enterprise with significant economic contribution.
- Social enterprises assessed case-by-case based on activity and project relevance
- Project must not have started before application submission. Any prior spend (orders, contracts, or works) will make the application ineligible.
- Match funding must come from non-public sources (e.g. business reserves, personal investment, approved loans). Public grants or state aid cannot be used.
- Full subsidy control declaration is required, covering all state aid received in the last 4 fiscal years (2022/23–2025/26), including grants from Invest NI, Inter Trade Ireland, GoFortt, Go-Succeed, and the Digital Transformation Flexible Fund
- Businesses based within a defined rural area of Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council. To check if your business is eligible, please use our postcode checker: <https://explore.nisra.gov.uk/postcode-search/>

Not eligible:

- Charities, not-for-profits, or public sector bodies

1.4 What can be funded?

- New equipment/ machinery
- Mobile machinery, such as scissor lifts, forklifts, push and ride-on lawn mowers, mini excavators.
- IT equipment, e.g. computers, laptop, printer.
- Computer software (outright purchase; staff training costs or ongoing license fees are NOT eligible)
- Digitisation projects
- E-commerce Websites to allow online purchase capabilities

Tendering Procedures:

Goods and services to be obtained by the Grant Recipient with an estimated cost of over £1,000 but not exceeding £50,000 must be procured on the basis of written quotations. The process that needs to be followed is set out in the table below:

	Number of Quotations Required, Tenders & FTS (Find a Tender Service)	Quotation/ Tender Thresholds (£) (Excl VAT)
1	No quotations required but ensure value for money	Up to £4,999.99
2	Minimum of 3 written quotations	£5,000.00 – £14,999.99
3	Minimum of 4 written quotations	£15,000.00 – £49,999.99
4	Publicly Advertised Tender Council Approval	Above £50,000.00
5	Above £213,477.00 (Incl. VAT) For Goods, Supplies or Services	Public Procurement (Agreement on Government Procurement) (Thresholds) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 FTS - (Find a Tender Service)

Public tender: should your project exceed £50,000 in value; your organisation is required to complete a public tender process and be able to evidence this. Further information can be found via the following link:

<https://antrimandnewtownabbey.gov.uk/procurement/>

1.5 What cannot be funded?

The following items cannot be funded under the Scheme:

- Equipment or machinery costing less than £20,000. Individual items may cost less than £20,000, but you must have a minimum eligible spend of at least £20,000 through a combination of items.
- Second-hand equipment, including refurbished equipment.
- Servicing of existing equipment.
- General maintenance or refurbishment works.
- CCTV, Signage
- Mobile Phones
- Solar panels and wind turbines, generators, wood waste heaters.
- Purchase of port-a-cabins, pods, sheds or any other building.
- Labour costs not directly associated with the installation of purchased equipment or build of e-commerce websites.
- Projects that have already started prior to a Letter of Offer.
- Any resource items, such as marketing materials, information websites (with no online purchasing capabilities), training courses (including training costs

associated with online systems availed of through the grant), feasibility studies, market research.

- Annual fees associated with software equipment.
 - Motorised vehicles, including vans, lorries, cars, boats, bikes, quads etc.
 - Any activity or action that is a statutory requirement of your business (e.g. for Health and Safety purposes such as Personal Protective Equipment) or the responsibility of another government department.
 - Business running costs, such as staff costs, rent, rates, electric, insurance, stock.
 - Bank interest charges, referral fees and foreign currency transaction charges.
 - Consumable items used by businesses that are replaced regularly because they wear out or are used up (for example hand sanitiser, masks, gloves, visors, high-visibility vests for staff, printer ink).
 - Staff Uniforms or clothing, including personal protective items.
- Please note this list is not exhaustive, your local Council Officer can speak to you about your individual project.
- What should I submit with my application?

Your application form must be completed in full and all supporting documents attached. This includes:

- A recent bank statement (within 3 months)
- Like for like quotations

2.0 How to answer the questions

2.1 Information about the applicant

This question gathers information about the applicant organisation including contact details.

2.2 Project Proposal

This grant is not intended to support routine business maintenance, replacement of existing assets or general operational expenses. It is designed to fund discrete, forward-looking initiatives that represent a significant step change in the business's capacity, market reach, or environmental performance.

Applicants must clearly articulate how the proposed project will generate tangible, measurable outcomes over the next 12 months following project completion. Vague statements such as "we expect to grow" or "we hope to improve efficiency" are insufficient. Instead, applications must specify precise, quantifiable targets.

For example, rather than stating that the project will increase sales, applicants must state the projected percentage increase in turnover, supported by market analysis, customer feedback, or pre-orders. Similarly, rather than asserting that the project will create jobs, per week each applicant must specify the number of full-time and part-time positions to be created, the roles involved, the hours' role will entail, and how these positions are directly attributable to the funded activity.

The same principle applies to profitability, cost savings, and environmental impact. Applicants should quantify projected increases in net profit margins, reductions in energy consumption measured in kilowatt-hours or tonnes of CO₂ equivalent, or waste reduction expressed as a percentage of current usage. These figures must be realistic, evidence-based, and directly linked to the items or activities for which funding is sought.

3.0 Assessment Criteria

Applications will be assessed against five key criteria, each weighted according to strategic priority. The most heavily weighted criteria relate to the necessity of the grant and the demonstrable economic impact of the project.

3.1 Assessment and Scoring

1. Project Need & Additionality — The Necessity of the Grant (25%)

The central question in this section is: Would this project proceed without the financial support of this grant? Applicants must provide a detailed explanation of the financial, operational, or market barriers that prevent the project from being delivered using existing resources or alternative sources of finance.

Applicants should explain the specific limitations they face — such as insufficient cash reserves, difficulty securing commercial lending due to credit history or trading performance, or the absence of internal capital to cover upfront investment. Evidence of attempted financing, such as declined loan applications or lack of investor interest, should be included where available.

The match funding component must be credible and verifiable. If match funding is to be drawn from personal savings, a declaration signed by the applicant and supported by bank statements must be provided. If a business loan is to be used, a formal letter of approval from the lender must accompany the application.

Projects that merely seek to cover operational shortfalls, replace worn-out equipment without innovation, or fund activities that would have occurred regardless of grant support will not be considered to meet the additionality requirement.

2. Economic Impact, productivity and Job Creation (30%)

This criterion evaluates the scale, quality, and sustainability of the economic benefits the project will deliver. The focus is on outcomes that extend beyond the business itself to contribute to broader regional economic development.

Applicants must specify the number of new full-time and part-time jobs to be created, with clear definitions of what constitutes full-time (minimum 30 hours per week) and part-time (minimum 16 hours per week) employment. Each role must be directly linked to the project — for instance, a new sales manager hired to manage expanded export operations, or a technician employed to operate new machinery.

Turnover growth must be expressed as a percentage increase relative to the most recent complete financial year, or to a realistic baseline if the business is less than one year old. Profitability improvements must also be quantified, with projections showing how increased revenue translates into higher net margins. Where applicable, applicants should outline the entry of new markets, including export destinations, and provide evidence of demand, such as letters of intent, contractual agreements, or market research.

The sustainability of these outcomes must be demonstrated. The grant is not intended to create temporary or short-term activity. Applicants should explain how the business will maintain the new capacity, employment, or revenue stream beyond the grant period.

3. Innovation, Sustainability and Net Zero Alignment (15%)

This criterion assesses the extent to which the project introduces new thinking, reduces environmental impact or contributes to long-term ecological resilience.

Applicants must describe how the project advances environmental performance beyond standard industry practice. This may include, but is not limited to, the adoption of energy-efficient technologies, the reduction of material waste through redesigned processes, the use of renewable materials or the implementation of circular economy principles.

Applications should quantify the environmental benefit where possible. For example, a project that replaces an inefficient heating system with a heat pump should include the projected reduction in energy consumption and associated carbon emissions. A business that introduces reusable or compostable packaging should state the volume of single-use materials it will eliminate annually.

Innovation must be clearly defined. This does not require technological breakthroughs. It may involve the adaptation of existing methods to new contexts — such as digitising customer service to reduce travel or introducing a new distribution model that reduces logistics emissions. The key is that the change must represent a meaningful departure from current practice.

4. Non-Displacement and Local Benefit (15%)

The grant must not result in the displacement of economic activity from one local business to another. Applicants must demonstrate that their project will contribute positively to the local economy without undermining existing enterprises.

This requires an understanding of the local market landscape. Applicants should explain how their project serves a previously unmet need, expands the overall market, or creates complementary relationships with other local businesses. For example, a business that sources raw materials from other local producers, collaborates on community events, or attracts new customers to the area who then patronise other local services, demonstrates positive externalities.

Applications that propose entering an already saturated market without a clear differentiation strategy, or that are likely to draw customers away from nearby competitors without offering broader benefits, will be viewed unfavourably.

As a way of evidence letters of support are welcome to be submitted alongside application forms.

5. Management Capacity and Feasibility (15%)

This evaluates whether the applicant and/or their team possesses the necessary skills, experience and organisational capability to deliver the project successfully.

Applicants should describe their background in business management, financial planning, marketing or relevant technical fields. Formal qualifications, training courses attended, mentoring received or prior experience in managing similar projects should be detailed. Where the business has a management team, the relevant experience of each key individual should be outlined.

The project plan must be realistic and achievable within the required timeframe. Applicants must confirm that the project can be fully completed, with all equipment installed and operational and all payments settled, by 31 December 2026.

Applicants must achieve a score of 65% to be considered for funding.

3.2 What happens if an application is successful

In the event of a successful application, the assessment panel will:

- 3.2.1 Officers may conduct price checks or compare quotations to determine value for money.
- 3.2.2 A Letter of Offer will be issued outlining the terms and conditions of your grant as well as the claim process.
- 3.2.3 The Letter of Offer must be signed and returned within 10 days, the Grant recipient must provide details of a designated bank account for all transactions relevant to the funding.
- 3.2.4 The Grant shall be used only for the purposes of the Project as defined by the Applicant in the application form or variations, which the Council has agreed to fund.
- 3.2.5 The Council reserves the right to withhold any or all of the payments and/or require the Grant Recipient to repay part or all of the Grant if Council deems there to be a substantial or material change in the nature, scale or timing of the Project, or if the Grant is used for purposes other than those specified in the application or agreed variations.

- 3.2.6 Grant payment is retrospective and therefore costs will only be reimbursed once the following steps have been completed:
- The project is complete
 - Applicants must submit evidence of expenditure, including a claim form, original invoices, bank statements, photographs etc.
 - Officers may complete a site visit.
 - Only then will the grant payment be processed.
- 3.2.7 Council will release funds after verification of satisfactory receipts and evidence of payment i.e. bank statements. Claims must be for the items specified in the Letter of Offer.
- 3.2.8 Payment will only be released to an individual bank account and that account must be the same as the details on the application and supporting documentation.
- 3.2.9 The Council reserves the right to terminate or suspend authorisation of Grant Payments and/or to withhold any or all the financial assistance should the Project not be delivered in line with this offer of Grant Aid.
- 3.2.10 To meet Council's audit requirements, when making a claim, applicants should retain copies of receipts and evidence of payments made in the form of Bank statements.

Payments made in cash will not be accepted

3.4 Monitoring and reporting

If you receive a grant, you will be in receipt of public funding, and this must be accountable. Monitoring and reporting are an essential requirement.

If any information in the application, monitoring or supporting information is found to be untrue or misleading, we will withdraw any grant. If we have already paid part of a grant, you must repay it. This will have implications for any future applications or requests for funding. We may also review grants made to you in the past.

3.5 Marketing and Promotion

If appropriate, the Grant Recipient shall acknowledge the contribution made by the Council in all relevant publicity materials including brochures, leaflets, newspaper articles etc. The Council shall be entitled to publish details of the assistance at such times and in such manner as is necessary without further agreement from the Grant Recipient.

3.6 Breach of Letter of Offer and Claw-Back arrangements

If the Grant Purpose ceases to be carried out during the relevant Grant Period as a result of any act, omission or default on the part of the grant applicant, including any breach of the terms and conditions contained within the Letter of Offer, the Council will invoke clawback procedures to demand that the Applicant repays in part or full the Grant Funding awarded.

The Applicant will be considered in breach of their funding offer if the following apply, please note this list is not exhaustive: -

- They provide misleading or inaccurate information, by accident or deliberate during the application process
- At any time during the project act dishonestly or negligently causing directly or indirectly any detriment to the activity or bring into disrepute the reputation of the Council by association through funding award(s)
- The applicant funded is in receipt of duplicate funding from any other source for any element of the activity
- There is a change of purpose, benefit or recipient, either during the project or within a reasonable period after its completion
- Project is not completed

Any reported or identified breaches or potential breaches that cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of the Council will result in the grant award in part or in full being clawed back by the Council.

If funding is withdrawn or clawback procedures invoked the applicant will have no legal redress to have funding reinstated. The decision of Council in this case will be final.

3.7 What happens if an application is ineligible/unsuccessful?

If your application is ineligible/unsuccessful for funding, you will be notified via email. Feedback will be available on request.

3.8 Appeals procedure

An appeals procedure will be available to unsuccessful applicants. For further information please contact the officers detailed at the end of this document.

3.9 Fraud and Corruption

The Council is committed to the prevention and detection of fraud and the promotion of an anti-fraud culture.

The Council operates a zero-tolerance attitude to fraud and corruption, whether from internal or external sources. The Council requires individuals that it deals with, to act with honesty and integrity, to safeguard the public resources and to report all suspicions of fraud and corruption.

Every case of alleged or suspected fraud will be thoroughly investigated in accordance with the Anti-Fraud and Corruption Policy, and where appropriate, referred to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). The Council will also seek to recover any loss suffered because of fraud and if appropriate, will take civil, and/or disciplinary action.

The following relevant policies can be located on the Council website:

- Anti- Bribery Policy - April 2023
- Anti-Fraud and Corruption Policy - April 2023
- Financial Regulations – April 2024
- Fraud Response Plan - March 2023
- Raising Concerns Policy – November 2023

The Council reserves the right to disallow any other current, pending or future grant applications and claims submitted by an individual in respect of the financial year and to apply a moratorium on Council funding to any individual where fraudulent activity is identified within the current financial year and for at least 2 forthcoming financial years.

The Council will inform in writing the individual, where fraud is suspected or has been identified. In the case of a grant where the recipient is underage of 18 years the parent/guardian will also be notified.

4.0 Application Process

Call Number	Opens	Closes	Notification of outcome
1	13 April 2026	8 May 2026	July 2026

Grant Information Sessions

Interested applicants should book a place at one the person/online Grant Information Sessions where officers will take individuals through the grant funding available as well as the new application forms and online process. For further information please visit Council's Grants and Funding webpage:

<https://antrimandnewtownabbey.gov.uk/residents/grants-funding/>

Contact details:

For further information, please contact:

E: fundingunit@antrimandnewtownabbey.gov.uk

E: investment@antrimandnewtownabbey.gov.uk

5.0 Additional Information for Applicants

a. Publication of Data

If your application is successful and your project is awarded funding, please note that the Council, LMP and Department for Communities (DfC) may publicise details of all financial support awarded/paid out to beneficiaries. This will include the name of the business, their postal town, their post code and the total amount of financial support received by the business.

Details of applications (successful and unsuccessful) will be submitted to Council, the LMP and DfC and business details will be published as part of the Council report, which are accessible to the public.

b. Freedom of Information Act

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 gives members of the public the right to request any information that we hold, subject to certain exemption that may apply. This includes information received from third parties, such as, although not limited to, grant applicants, grant holders and contractors. If information is requested under the Freedom of Information Act, we will release it, subject to exemptions; although we may consult with you first. If you think that information you are providing may be exempt from release if requested, you should let us know when you apply. For further information please visit the Information Commissioner's Office at <https://ico.org.uk/>

Appendix 1

General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council are entitled to disclose your details to other government agencies, departments and bodies engaged in distributing funds (subject to the terms of the Data Protection Act 1998, known as General Data Protection Regulations GDPR from May 2018).

To process your grant application, applicants are advised that:

- Council use the information you give us on the application form during assessment and for the life of any grant we award you to administer and analyse grants and for our own research.
- Council may give copies of this information to individuals and organisations we consult when assessing applications, when monitoring grants and evaluating the way our funding programmes work and the effect they have. These organisations may include accountants, external evaluators and other organisations or groups involved in delivering the project.
- Council may also share information with other departments, organisations providing match funding and other organisations and individuals with a legitimate interest in applications and grants, or for the prevention or detection of fraud.
- Council might use the data you provide for our own research. We recognise the need to maintain the confidentiality of vulnerable groups and their details will not be made public in any way, except as required by law.