

# Written Ministerial Statement

*The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.*

## Department for Communities

### THE NORTHERN IRELAND FOOTBALL FUND PROGRAMME UPDATE

Published at 11am on Wednesday 4 March 2026

#### Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities):

I wish to update you and members on progress to deliver The Northern Ireland Football Fund (TNIFF).

#### PILOT STAGE OF THE GRASSROOTS FACILITIES PROGRAMME

Engagement with stakeholders has highlighted both the scale of the grassroots game and the longstanding deficits in pitches, changing facilities and related infrastructure. While the need is clear, detailed data on demand, project costs and match funding remains limited due to the diverse and dispersed nature of the sector.

To test the policy proposals and inform the roll-out of a full programme, my Department will run a pilot stage of the Grassroots Facilities Programme (GFP).

The Pilot will allow my Department to begin addressing the urgent need for improved facilities at this level, while allowing us to test policy assumptions, refine eligibility and scoring criteria, and build the evidence to inform decisions on the scope and design of a full programme.

#### Funding Streams

Applications will be assessed in one of two streams:

##### Stream 1 is open to:

**(A) Grassroots Football Clubs who are the Owner of the Grassroots Football Facility or Grassroots Football Clubs who intend to become the Owner of the Grassroots Football Facility prior to the issue of a Funding Agreement**

##### Grassroots Football Club Definition

For the purposes of this Programme a Grassroots Football Club is defined as a football club which is affiliated to the Irish Football Association, and which was not eligible to apply for the Performance Programme at the date of its launch – 30 January 2025.

##### Owner Definition

For the purposes of this Programme the Owner of a facility is defined as an organisation that holds either:

- (1) a freehold interest; or
- (2) a lease that will expire no earlier than 1 February 2052

and

##### **(B) The Owners of a facility in partnership with a Grassroots Football Club**

For the purposes of this Programme a Partner Grassroots Football Club is a Grassroots Football Club (as defined above) that trains and / or plays its home matches at the facility and will support the applicant in delivery of the benefits associated with the proposed grant funded project.

Schools and Education Authority Owners of Grassroots Football Facilities are not eligible to apply to this Programme.

**Stream 2 is open to:**

**(A) Councils applying for a Grassroots Football Facility**

**(B) Councils applying in partnership with a Grassroots Football Club**

Each of Northern Ireland's eleven councils can submit one application for a Grassroots Football Facility.

**Budget**

The Pilot will be allocated an indicative budget of £9million with the first awards payable to applicants as early as financial year 2026/2027.

Applicants to The Pilot can apply for funding awards between £500,000 and £1.5million.

**Process**

Unlike TNIFF Performance Programme, a completed application form for The Pilot will serve as a business case for the applicant's individual project, underpinning a final expenditure decision.

This streamlined process should be less resource intensive for both the applicants and my Department, ultimately resulting in shorter timescales for delivery.

**Scoring and Decisions**

The Pilot will fund six projects based on the highest-ranking projects under each of the following:

- Four projects from Stream 1 – one each from each of the four Divisional Associations (County Antrim & District, Fermanagh and Western, Mid Ulster and North West of Ireland) as affiliated by the Irish FA in NI
- Two council projects (Stream 2)

Any additional projects will be funded on the basis of availability of funding.

**Timescales**

The call for applications for Stream 1 and Stream 2 will close 15 April 2026 and 29 April 2026 respectively. Applications will be assessed by officials in line with the published scoring matrix.

Further information, including Application Questions, Guidance Documents and Scoring Matrix, will be available at <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/northern-ireland-football-fund> from 11am on Wednesday 4 March 2026.

**UPDATES ON OTHER STRANDS - PERFORMANCE PROGRAMME**

The first strand of The Northern Ireland Football Fund, the Performance Programme, launched in January last year. Following assessment and scoring of the applications, a prioritised cohort of 20 projects was selected to progress to the next stage. These projects are now preparing their individual business cases.

**NATIONAL FOOTBALL CENTRE**

My Department is working with the Irish FA to develop a business case that is expected to include a formal request for funding to support the development of a National Football Centre.

**NEXT STEPS**

I will continue to keep members informed of progress as we reach key milestones in delivering this significant investment, which will benefit football and the wider community across Northern Ireland.