

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department for Communities

THE NORTHERN IRELAND FOOTBALL FUND GRASSROOTS FACILITIES PROGRAMME

Published at 11am on Wednesday 30 September 2026

Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities):

Mr Speaker,

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

Members will recall that I previously advised the Assembly that The Northern Ireland Football Fund comprises three strands:

- Performance Programme;
- Grassroots Facilities Programme; and
- National Football Centre.

Today I am pleased to advise the Assembly that a significant milestone has been reached in the delivery of the Grassroots Facilities Programme.

Grassroots Facilities Programme Pilot Stage

Earlier this year, I launched the Pilot Stage of the Grassroots Facilities Programme, making up to £9 million from my Department's capital DEL budget available to support a small number of significant grassroots football infrastructure projects.

The Pilot was designed to:

- address immediate infrastructure needs across the grassroots football sector
- test key programme design features
- gather evidence on demand, costs and delivery capacity
- inform development of a future full Grassroots Facilities Programme

Clubs and councils were invited to submit applications for projects to enhance or create grounds to host grassroots football. Project values were to be in the £500k - £1.5m range, with a requirement for club applicants to provide 5% partnership funding and councils to provide 40% partnership funding. Applicants were allowed to include a range of components in their project such as pitches, floodlights, changing/ club house facilities, etc; in contrast, the Irish FA/ DCMS Grassroots Facilities Fund demanded a pitch proposal at the core of every project. Clubs could apply within the Divisional Association they are affiliated to and councils could apply for one facility. Applicants were required to demonstrate need and benefits, particularly for under-represented groups and communities.

The response has been extremely positive.

My Department received 42 applications with a combined project value of almost £58 million and requests for almost £47 million in financial support. This clearly demonstrates both the scale of participation in grassroots football and the significant demand for improved facilities across Northern Ireland.

Scoring and Decisions

Applications have now been assessed and moderated in accordance with the published scoring matrix.

I previously advised Members the Pilot would 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 & Western, Mid Ulster and North-West of Ireland) as affiliated by the Irish FA.
- Two council projects (stream 2)

I am pleased to advise that, while remaining within budget and in line with the published Guidance Document, the Pilot will fund a seventh project being the second highest scoring applicant from the Divisional Association with the highest number of applications.

Funding Agreements

My officials will now engage with the successful applicants to undertake due diligence which includes

- Financial Due Diligence check
- Legal Due Diligence check
- Feasibility check
- Subsidy Control Act assessment

I anticipate that the first applicants could complete due diligence and receive a Funding Agreement before the end of the 2026 calendar year.

Next Steps

This Pilot Stage was designed not only to deliver early investment but also to provide valuable evidence on need, costs, demand levels and delivery capacity within the grassroots sector.

The information gathered through the Pilot is helping shape future proposals for the wider Grassroots Facilities Programme.

Performance Programme

Work is ongoing with the prioritised cohort of projects shortlisted by the Performance Programme's application process. These 20 projects are in business case stage. These business cases are currently being taken through the normal development and approval process.

National Football Centre

The Department also continues to work closely with the Irish Football Association on the development of a National Football Centre. I am pleased to say that the Department has determined that the project demonstrates value for money and the next steps required to bring forward this important project are underway.

Conclusion

The Northern Ireland Football Fund represents one of the most significant investments ever made in football infrastructure in Northern Ireland.

The completion of the Grassroots Facilities Programme Pilot Stage assessment process marks another important milestone in delivering that commitment and I look forward to updating Members further as these projects progress.