



Rialtas  
na hÉireann  
Government  
of Ireland

Ár dTodhchaí  
Tuaithe  
Our Rural  
Future



Lár Bailte ar dTús  
Town Centre First

## Town Centre First - Suite of Supports 2024

### Scheme Outline

February 2024

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## **Section 1: Overview**

The Town Centre First (TCF) policy is a major cross-government policy that aims to tackle vacancy, combat dereliction and breathe new life into our town centres. It supports “Our Rural Future”, Ireland’s rural development policy which is integral to our national economic, social, cultural and environmental well-being. It advocates for a holistic, place-based approach to sustainable rural development.

The policy seeks to support towns of all sizes, recognising each town is unique and diverse and acknowledges that a “one size fits all” approach will not achieve sustainable and thriving communities.

Recognising that additional supports are required to achieve the TCF policy goals, this Suite of Supports will implement a series of measures for rural communities. Each measure is accompanied by its own eligibility criteria, thereby targeting a number of towns per county.

These measures will compliment other funding initiatives within the Department, including the Town and Village Renewal Scheme and the Rural Regeneration Development Fund.

These supports will ensure resources which are effectively allocated and provides clear support to local communities and town teams in leading the revitalisation of their towns and villages.

## **Section 2: Supported Measures**

The TCF Suite of Supports will replace supports previously available for the development of TCF plans, town health-checks and the Project Development Measure (PDM) through the Town and Village Renewal Scheme.

Funding is available under the following measures:

### **i. Town Centre First Town Team Support Fund:**

This measure will support the establishment and/or development of up to 3 town teams where they are not already well established with a total fund of €30,000 available, **up to a maximum funding amount of €10,000 per town.**

Local authorities in consultation with the TRO and local communities may nominate four towns, in which up to three towns may be selected to avail of this funding up to a max grant amount of €10,000 per town. These four towns must be detailed in order of priority by the local authority and the Minister will have final selection of the three towns to be supported.

This funding can be used to help support the following:

- Establishment of town teams where they are already not established and support capacity-building activities for town teams that are established/at an early stage of development (*for example via targeted training/ mentoring, communication and consultation/community engagement initiatives*); and
- Data collation and research which will help them to identify the key priorities for their towns and of assessing the vitality, resilience and performance of town centres in order to develop high quality project applications for available funding schemes.

Towns with a population under 10,000 may be eligible to apply to this measure.

Funding under this measure must be used for this sole purpose of supporting the activities as detailed above and cannot be used in conjunction with other measures under this initiative.

### **ii. Town Centre First Plan:**

Following on from the lessons, learnings and experience of the pilot phase of TCF Plans, this measure will support the development of a TCF plan in a selected town up to a **maximum funding amount of €30,000.**

Local authorities, in consultation with the TRO and local communities, may **nominate up to three towns, in which one town will be selected by the Minister and allocated funding of €30,000** to develop a TCF plan.

This support is aimed at towns who are at developed stage, therefore nominated towns are required to have a town team in place and/or have a completed a town analysis/ preparatory work and are ready to begin working on the plan once the town is selected. The focus of these plans should be on presenting the vision for the town, as developed by the Town Team.

This funding may be used to procure external expertise to develop the TCF plan, utilise internal expertise within the local authority to develop the plan, or involve a combination of both. Where additional LA staff expertise and input is required, i.e. planners, engineers etc., to the development of the Plan, these costs may be charged to the project. Costs should be proportional and reasonable in line with overall costs, and relevant records should be maintained regarding same.

For towns without a prior health check completed, rationale must be provided by the Town Team as to the readiness and additionality of a TCF plan to the town, which will be subject to approval by the Department.

Plans should clearly identify the challenges and priorities in each town and the vision of the Town Team, including key projects and development that may support town revitalisation.

The plan should learn from any current and inform any future statutory plans that apply to the town, such as specific objectives within climate, sustainable development, social and economic i.e. Local Authority Climate Action Plans, Local Area Plans, Local Economic and Community Plans etc. The TCF plan should be integrated, where appropriate, with the statutory development planning system to ensure that overall planning-related outcomes are supportive of the Town Centre First policy and do not give rise to alternative development scenarios that may undermine it.

Actions or identified projects stemming from the plan may also be translated into a more detailed all-encompassing Urban Design Framework, or similar, to address issues related to macro issues structure of the town centre (links, land use, parks/squares, building layouts) and particulars related to its character (street layouts, architectural language, materials palettes). Such plans demonstrate further commitment by authorities and provide greater certainty for communities and potential investors/developers.

Further guidance on how to complete a TCF plan can be found in Appendix 8 of the TCF Policy. All previous TCF plans can be found on [towncentrefirst.ie](http://towncentrefirst.ie)

Towns selected under the first phase and that have already completed a TCF plan are not eligible under this measure.

Towns with a population of under 10,000 may be eligible to apply to this measure.

Funding under this measure must be used for this sole purpose of completing a TCF plan and cannot be used in conjunction with other measures under this initiative.

### **iii. Project Development Measure (PDM):**

The purpose of this measure is to assist local authorities to contribute to a pipeline of significant, well developed projects which might be subsequently progressed to construction stage, subject to the availability of further funding.

Local authorities, in consultation with the TRO and local communities, may detail two project applications under this measure up to a maximum value of €50,000 per application and a maximum funding amount of €100,000 at a grant rate of 90% of the total project costs per project application and a minimum match funding rate of 10% of the total project costs.

Funding may be awarded for costs such as detailed design, planning, procurement, professional fees, assessments and other development costs.

The approval of funding under this category does not automatically guarantee future funding under alternative funding streams for delivery of the emerging projects – the resulting projects will need to be submitted as normal under the competitive funding processes.

PDM's have previously been supported through the Town and Village Renewal Scheme 2021 & 2022 and are similar in nature to Category 2 projects under the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund.

Funding under this measure must be used for this sole purpose of developing the approved PDM projects and cannot be used in conjunction with other supported measures under this initiative. There is a maximum grant rate of 90% and a minimum match funding rate of 10% of the total project costs for project development measure projects.

- ***Specific Provision to support the North-Western Region***

In recognition of the classification by the EU Commission of the North-West Region as a Transition Region and with a view to proactively address regional disparities, the Department is permitting the 8 counties in the North West Region to submit **one additional PDM application (3 applications in total)** and an **increased grant rate of 95%** with a **minimum match funding rate of 5%** of the total project costs.

Counties located in the North-West Region, also detailed in Appendix 2, include:

1. Cavan
2. Donegal
3. Galway
4. Leitrim
5. Mayo
6. Monaghan
7. Roscommon
8. Sligo

For the counties listed above, **up to three PDM applications with a maximum funding amount of €50,000 per project** application may be submitted.

### **Section 3: Town Nomination, Application & Assessment Process**

The Town Centre First Suite of Supports is targeted at rural towns and villages. Towns with a population of up to 10,000 people that are located outside of the 5 city metropolitan areas are eligible to apply for funding under this initiative. A list of the eligible local authorities for this initiative is detailed in Appendix 1.

#### **i. Measure 1 - TCF Town Team Support Fund**

Applications to this measure should be submitted on the 'Measure 1 – TCF Town Team Support Fund Application Form'.

Local authorities may nominate **up to four towns** for consideration to avail for funding under this measure.

In the application full detail of town nominations, project financial information and any additional project information should be provided. Only activities that are capable of being delivered within a 10 month timeframe should be submitted.

Local authorities are required to detail their **nominated towns in order of priority**. Up to **three towns may be approved** to avail of funding under this measure.

Completed application must be submitted to the Department by the **COB Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> March 2024**.

#### **ii. Measure 2 - Town Centre First Plan:**

Applications to this measure should be submitted on the 'Measure 2 – TCF Plan Nomination Form'.

Local authorities may nominate **up to three towns** for consideration to avail for funding under this measure. Only towns that are capable of delivering their completed plan within a 12-18 month timeframe should be submitted.

In the nomination form full details of town nominations, project financial information and any additional project information should be provided. Local authorities are required to detail their **nominated towns in order of priority**.

In instances where a nominated town has completed a plan similar to a TCF plan, with the exception of town health-checks, full details of this plan must be provided to the Department where a decision on eligibility to complete a TCF plan will be determined.

Following consideration of nominations, **one town per local authority will be approved** to complete a TCF plan.

Completed nomination form must be submitted to the Department by the **COB Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> February 2024.**

**iii. Measure 3 - Project Development Measure (PDM):**

Applications to this measure should be submitted on the 'Measure 3 – PDM Application Form'.

Local authorities may submit up to two PDM applications, and up to three PDM applications for eligible North-West Counties.

Each project application should provide full detail on the project, including general, financial, planning, timelines for completion and additionality to the region.

Only proposals that are capable of being delivered within a 12-18 month timeframe should be submitted.

Local authorities are required to advertise for expressions of interest from towns/villages in their area for the Project Development Measure. Local authorities must provide an overview sheet and copies of all expression of interest forms received by the local authority under this measure.

The development of these proposals must be undertaken in consultation with the appointed TRO and the local town/village community and business interests. Full involvement by community interests and/or business interests will be an essential feature of successful projects. Ideally, projects will have been identified as part of a town plan, health check or similar study, produced for the town or village. Projects that cannot demonstrate that a consultative process has been undertaken to ascertain the views of local community and businesses will not be permitted.

The selection of PDM projects will be by means of a competitive process. When selecting the successful projects, in line with the Public Spending Code, the Department will give consideration to the past performance of the local authority in delivering previous projects under the scheme. Final project selection will be made by the Department on the basis of proposals submitted by the local authorities.

The assessment and approval of all projects will have regard to a number of factors including: alignment with Our Rural Future; TCF plan; the statutory development planning system; additional Department priorities; available funding; the range, mix, quality and impact of proposed projects; past project delivery performance of local authorities; previous funding provided and all other relevant considerations.

The Department will give particular consideration to project proposals in a TCF plan that are supported by relevant development objectives in any local area plan or development plan of the local authority. Additional marks as part of the competitive assessment process will be available for applications that demonstrates evidence of this.

Projects that include nature based solutions or contain a strong sustainability focus will be given additional examination and may be considered more favourably. A focus on accessibility for all and inclusivity should be to the fore when developing project proposals for the community.

Completed project applications must be submitted to the Department by the **COB Monday 8<sup>th</sup> April 2024.**



## **Section 4 – Funding Conditions**

### **4.1 – Eligible Costs, Grant Level, Funding Allocation and Match Funding**

The local authority must ensure that expenditure in respect of the towns selected under each measure is used exclusively to deliver eligible activities under the TCF – Suite of Supports.

#### **i. Town Centre First Town Team Support Fund**

A maximum funding value of €10,000 per town (maximum of three towns) and an overall total funding amount of €30,000 with a grant rate of 100%.

Grant drawdown will be based on vouched expenditure. Commitments for future spend will not be accepted by the Department. Upon submitting a drawdown request, the following conditions must have been met:

- Evidence of all costs incurred in respect of development and capacity building measures in the nominated town(s); and
- Provide a report on completed activities, to include, but not limited to, photographic evidence, information on types of activities undertaken, meetings, events held, or training etc.

Applications to be submitted by **06/03/2024**. Supported activities must be fully completed and final drawdown submitted to the Department by **15/11/2024**.

#### **ii. Town Centre First Plan:**

There is a maximum funding amount of €30,000 for the development of the TCF plan with a grant rate of 100%.

Grant drawdown will be based on vouched expenditure. Commitments for future spend will not be accepted. Upon submitting a drawdown request, the following conditions must have been met:

- Evidence of all costs incurred in respect of the TCF plan; and  
Provide a copy of the final ‘TCF plan’, certified and approved by the Chief Executive of the local authority and provided to the Minister for Rural and Community Development.

Town nominations must be submitted by **21/02/2024**. Plans must be completed and drawdown submitted to the Department within the **12 to 18 month timeframe**. Final deadline date will be communicated following announcement of successful towns.

#### **iii. Project Development Measure (PDM):**

The maximum funding amount available is €50,000 per project with a grant rate of 90% of the total project costs. North-West Counties may avail of an increase grant rate of 95% of the total project costs.

The match funding requirement of 10%, and 5% for North West Counties, of the total project costs must be contributed by the local authority and/or the community and/or philanthropic contributions. This must take the form of a cash contribution. Funds secured from existing Department of Rural and Community Development schemes or programmes or other public funding streams are not eligible to be used as matched funding.

Grant drawdown will be based on vouched expenditure. Commitments for future spend will not be accepted by the Department. Upon submitting a drawdown request the following conditions must have been met:

- Evidence of all costs incurred in respect of completing the PDM, and a Case Study report on the completed project.

Applications must be submitted by **08/04/2024**. Projects must be fully completed and drawdown submitted to the Department within the **12-18 month completion timeframe**. Final deadline date will be notified to LAs on announcement of successful projects.

➤ **Specific Provision to support the North-Western Region**

In recognition of the classification by the EU Commission of the North-Western region as a Transition Region and with a view to proactively address regional disparities, these counties may avail of an additional project development measure application and a **maximum grant aid of 95% and a minimum match funding rate of 5% of the total project costs**. This will exceptionally apply to counties in the North-West region.

#### 4.2 – Drawdown Schedule and Project Completion Timeframes

Requests for drawdown must be on the official Drawdown form provided by the Department.

Funding drawdown requests must be based on vouched (spent) expenditure.

Funding can be drawdown in a maximum of 2 phases. The minimum amount that can be drawn down at any time is 50% of the total grant funding amount under each measure.

Projects supported under **Measure 1: Town Centre First Town Team Support Fund** must be fully completed and drawdown documentation submitted to the Department **by 15<sup>th</sup> November 2024**.

Projects supported under **Measure 2: Town Centre First Plan** must be fully completed and drawdown documentation submitted to the Department within the **12 to 18 month completion timeframe** from project approval.

Projects supported under **Measure 3: Project Development Measure** must be fully completed and drawdown documentation submitted to the Department within the **12 to 18 month completion timeframe** from project approval.

Should the local authority require any amendment to final completion dates, this must be requested in writing to the Department in advance. Changes to projects is not permitted and should not take place without advance agreement of the Department.

Funding drawdown requests must be signed by the Director of Services (DOS) or an authorised local authority official who should copy the DOS when submitting a claim.

A copy of Agresso reports or/and other financial system reports detailing project expenditure should accompany any funding drawdown request.

Regarding the Project Development Measure, evidence of the relevant and secured match funding of 10% or 5% for the North West Counties, must be included as part of each drawdown request.

Pre-funding will not be provided for any measure under this initiative.

#### 4.3 – Grant Terms and Conditions

1. Local authorities are eligible to complete subsequent TCF plans following the successful completion of the Phase 1 plans. Local authorities may apply to the Department for funding to complete a TCF plan, under this funding call, and funding may be allocated to the local authority, however expenditure incurred on subsequent TCF plans in advance of completion of Phase 1 plans will not be deemed eligible.
2. Local authorities must commit to ensuring that in respect of any towns selected under the TCF initiative, all funding allocated will be used exclusively to deliver these measures. The local authority further agrees to abide by the terms of the Letter of Undertaking and this Scheme Outline.
3. The Department has committed to providing each local authority with a maximum funding amount of €160,000 (€210,000 for the eight North-West local authorities as outlined in Appendix 2) with each measure having its own maximum grant funding and minimum match funding amount. Therefore, the Department is not liable to cover any excess cost incurred by the local authority above each measures maximum funding amount.
4. Projects must be completed in full in order to drawdown the full grant amount. Where it is established that a project has not been completed, the Department may request the grantee to repay any funding received on the project for incomplete elements. It is essential that any changes to the project elements must be advised and agreed with the Department in advance of the change being implemented; the Department will not retrospectively approve changes to projects.
5. All expenditure incurred on projects after the expected date of completion, without an agreed extension in place, will be deemed ineligible and will not be payable by the Department.
6. Measures supported under this initiative must not be co-funded using other Department or Government monies.
7. Non-compliance with the conditions as outlined or non-compliance with any additional stipulations agreed during contract negotiations may result in the requirement to refund part or all of the grant aid awarded.

8. The Department may de-commit funding or seek to recoup the funding allocated where any measure under this initiative is not completed within the time specified, where the express agreement to extend the funding arrangement has not been agreed in advance and where project changes/alternations are not notified and agreed in advance with the Department.
9. Regarding the TCF Town Team Support Fund, the local authority will ensure a detailed record of all activities completed, a report on implementation and financial records and any other associated reports which must be certified by the relevant Director of Services and submitted with the drawdown request for funding to the Minister for Rural and Community Development.
10. Regarding the TCF plan, the local authority will ensure a copy of the completed plan and any other associated reports which must be certified by the Town Team and submitted with the drawdown request for funding to the Minister for Rural and Community Development.
11. Regarding the PDM, the local authority will ensure all financial expenditure reports and any other associated reports which must be certified by the relevant Director of Services and submitted with the drawdown request for funding to the Minister for Rural and Community Development.
12. A TCF plan should not give rise to alternative development scenarios that may undermine any relevant development objectives in a statutory development or local area plan that is already in place.
13. All works completed under the TCF - Suite of Supports may be used for promotion purposes by the Department. The local authority agrees, in addition, to provide any reports and information relating to the delivery of this measure as may reasonably be requested by the Department.
14. The local authority will acknowledge the support of the Department of Rural and Community Development, and reference '*Our Rural Future*' and '*Town Centre First*' in all public announcements, scheme documentation and advertising, as appropriate, relating to the project. The Department may seek to use the project in the broader promotion of its policies. In addition, local authorities are not permitted to release any information regarding the selection of towns and projects supported under the TCF - Suite of Supports prior to an announcement by the Minister.
15. The Minister has the right to formally announce, launch and publicise all completed projects before any other party. Local authorities are not permitted to launch any completed measure under this initiative without prior approval from the Department.
16. Local authorities are required to comply with relevant public procurement guidelines where applicable. Guidance on this is available from the Office of Government Procurement ([www.OGP.gov.ie](http://www.OGP.gov.ie); [support@OGP.gov.ie](mailto:support@OGP.gov.ie)), [the Public Spending Code](#) and the relevant statement of principles for Grantees which underpin [Circular 13/2014](#).
17. The local authority should maintain a project file in relation to all projects supported under this Initiative. All documentation/files should contain all relevant documents in relation to procurement of contractors to complete the project, and/or records relating to local authority staff time associated with completion of all projects under these measures.

18. Full and accurate documentation to support all expenditure should be maintained in the project file and be accessible for audit purposes, for a period of six years from the date of completion. This includes all projects completed under the TCF - Suite of Supports.
19. The Department has the right to disclose for the purposes of a request under the Freedom of Information Act 2014 or otherwise, in connection with the TCF - Suite of Supports measures.
  - a) any information supplied by the local authority to the Department;
  - b) any relevant data gathered by the Department in administering grant aid in respect of the TCF plans, except where the information is considered to be personal or commercially sensitive.
20. The local authority and Department agree that they are subject to the data protection and privacy laws of Ireland and the EU, in particular the Data Protection Act 2018 and Regulation (EU) 2016/679, known as the EU General Data Protection Regulation (“GDPR”).

**Appendix 1 – Eligible Local Authorities for this initiative & Towns Selected for Phase 1**

<b>Eligible Local Authorities</b>	<b>Previously Selected Towns to complete a TCF Plan (Part of Phase 1)</b>
Carlow	Tullow
Cavan	Baileborough
Clare	Sixmilebridge
Cork	Skibereen
Donegal	Milford
Fingal	Lusk
Galway	Gort
Kerry	Milltown
Kildare	Clane
Kilkenny	Urlingford
Laois	Rathdowney
Leitrim	Carrick-on-Shannon
Limerick	Abbeyfeale
Longford	Longford Town
Louth	Dunleer
Mayo	Killala
Meath	Enfield
Monaghan	Carrickmacross
Offaly	Clara
Roscommon	Strokestown
Sligo	Tubbercurry
Tipperary	Roscrea
Waterford	Portlaw
Westmeath	Moate
Wexford	New Ross
Wicklow	Blessington

## Appendix 2 – North-West Counties in Transition

<b>Eligible Local Authorities</b>
<b>Cavan</b>
<b>Donegal</b>
<b>Galway</b>
<b>Leitrim</b>
<b>Mayo</b>
<b>Monaghan</b>
<b>Roscommon</b>
<b>Sligo</b>

*\*These eight counties are eligible for one additional Project Development Measure (3 project applications in total).*