

Crossing the Threshold

IFI Strategy 2026 – 2030



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To connect, empower and invest in people and communities through initiatives that include co-design for a present and future that enables economic and social advancement and deepens cohesion, empathy and sustainable peace.

Chair's Foreword

Welcome to Crossing the Threshold. At the heart of this strategy is an invitation to all of us to take the next imaginative leap in making peace with ourselves and our neighbours, joyful, celebrated and normal. The International Fund for Ireland (IFI) is committing to 10 more years of working collectively to this goal and there is much to do in that time. So much has been achieved already by so many, but our Peace Process needs new energy. The IFI is only one small part of the bigger jigsaw that will need collaboration, partnerships and collective action towards the shared purpose of lasting peace and social and economic advance.



In this new strategy, our internationalism, independence and ground level relationships will remain central to who we are as an organisation who can walk with those we seek to support. This means we can be agile, flexible and continue to take the risks, to succeed, to fail, to learn and to do better, together. We are changing our approach, moving away from multiple programmes to a single focus that will create space for community driven programmes that allow time for partnerships and co-design. We will continue to seek out and identify people and places that have been IFI partners in the past and need our support for bolder, tailored and impactful plans. We will also open the door to new people and ideas, those who have been quietly connecting and building a shared future but haven't seen themselves as peace builders. No

one person, community or organisation has all the answers, we are interested in how to engage new thinking, creativity and people to put fresh eyes on old problems and re-imagine.

As we move into the last decade of IFI, it is vital that we also find ways to effectively gather, analyse and share the learning of what will be 50 years of peacebuilding. We have had the privilege of international interest, attentiveness and support – we owe it to ourselves and those who have believed in our peace to share our knowledge and experience. The other essential aspect of this strategy and what we will look for in those we fund is to explore what should be continued and how. Some work or organisations may be time-bound and closely align with IFI, some may need transition planning with other funding bodies and statutory

partners. The question of the IFI's legacy and sustainability of those funded will be a critical part of our co-design and thinking.

In the last nine months, the IFI has worked tirelessly to gather insights and learning from those we have funded, some we haven't, other funders, government agencies, international partners, and many many people who have devoted lives to peacebuilding. Through some collective midwifery those insights and contributions are captured in the DNA of this new strategy.

For 40 years the International Fund for Ireland has backed ideas, people and places. It has built bridges, launched ferries, connected waterways, invested in shared spaces and the people-to-people connections and understanding that have helped to show what is possible when the commitment to peace is real.

The international funding of the IFI has allowed it to be resolutely independent. It has undoubtedly done a huge amount of good in building our communities' capacity to imagine and model better ways of being together in Northern Ireland and the southern border counties. We haven't always got it right, but we are proud of the risks the IFI has taken over the years to reach those who have felt left behind by poverty, lack of opportunity or progressive leadership.

We know that peace is a process, and that work will continue for decades to come. There is still much ahead to work through and keep in our collective sights; segregated education, social housing, the terrible legacy of human loss, work to be done on policing and much more. The enormity of the geopolitical shifts, outside our influence, have a disproportionate effect in a place still emerging from conflict and prone to aligning in sectarian terms on global issues.

In 2026 as we launch this new ambition and approach, we will also celebrate the last 40 years of the IFI and all that has been achieved. It is hard to quantify or capture the depth and determination of the thousands of people who have given so much already. Heartfelt thanks to all who have served as Board Members of IFI, and as members of the Secretariat in Belfast and Dublin. A particular thanks to the previous Board for their years of commitment and care and to the Programme Managers who delivered the last strategy. And thanks to our International Observers from Canada, New Zealand, Australia and the EU, and our bi-partisan advocates in the US who have been steadfast in their support and investment over the years alongside the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Office.

Our greatest thanks go to the peace makers, those who are in the thick of it and at the heart of it, taking the risks, the late-night phone calls, the personal and inter-personal presence to keep the streets safe, the young people focussed, the past remembered, the present celebrated and the future imagined.

We hope you will see yourselves in the intent and energy and renewed commitment of this current evolution of IFI – it will need all of us to cross the threshold.

A final note of thanks to Gabi Kent and Damian Gorman who brought a fresh critique and a challenge to be brave and purposeful in our intent.



Shona McCarthy, Chair

Joint Government Endorsement

We are pleased to welcome the new Strategy of the International Fund for Ireland, 'Crossing the Threshold: 2026-2030' and to commend the IFI for its enduring contribution to peace and reconciliation across the island of Ireland. As the IFI enters its final decade, this strategy marks an important moment of reflection, renewal, and ambition.

Since its establishment in 1986 by the United Kingdom and Irish Governments, with the generous support of the United States and other international donors, the IFI has made a profound difference to the lives of thousands of people affected by conflict and division. Throughout its 40 years, it has shown a strong capacity to adapt to changing political, social, and economic circumstances, providing impartial, flexible and responsive support to communities.

We recognise the continued need for the IFI's work, particularly in marginalised and disadvantaged communities that are often hardest to reach. We therefore welcome the continued development focus within this strategy, ensuring that targeted support remains available where it is most needed.

'Crossing the Threshold' sets out an important evolution in how the IFI will operate, through a managed open call process that will encourage innovative, creative, and inclusive approaches to peacebuilding. This will widen participation, support emerging voices, and enable new partnerships to flourish.

The UK and Irish Governments commend the work of the IFI and recognise that sustained engagement is essential to achieving lasting change. Partnership and collaboration will continue to be central to this work, strengthening cross-community and cross-border relationships and reinforcing shared responsibility for peace.

We welcome the IFI's new strategy and its mission. We also acknowledge the vital role of the international community, whose longstanding commitment has been invaluable. Together, we send a clear message to communities across Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland that their future remains a priority and that support for peace and reconciliation will continue into the Fund's final decade.




Hilary Benn MP
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland




Helen McEntee TD
Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Crossing the Threshold



Where courage meets possibility, the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) and its partners will push past limits and help shape tomorrow.

The International Fund for Ireland is more than a funder of projects. Over the last 40 years, it has been a supporter of risk takers for peace. It has been a driver of change in the places it has worked and with those it has engaged. It has responded flexibly with support and encouragement, helping to build capacity and community and enabling trust to flow. The IFI has powered positive, meaningful change and embedded peaceful relations amongst people and communities it has invested in. This strategy will continue to build upon and develop this in the next five years.

As the socio-political and economic context across Northern Ireland and the southern border counties continues to evolve, so too must the International Fund for Ireland's approach to building peace. In response to persistent division, growing local disparities and emerging complexities, the IFI is adopting a new strategic direction that enables a more flexible, responsive, and needs-led funding model.

Moving beyond distinct programme themes, the IFI will create an open framework, guided by our values and objectives. The IFI will seek new stakeholders, practices and ideas, whilst at the same time, we will continue to build upon the trust and goodwill already fostered. This highly flexible approach will allow the IFI to quickly scale its work to meet the funding levels of its donors, traditional and new. At the point of launch of this 5-year strategy, it is anticipated that the IFI has £20m-£25m, and will continue to seek investment in response to need. All applications will be assessed, supported, and delivered, based on their relevance to locally identified needs, alignment with the IFI's overarching objectives, and their potential for sustainable peacebuilding impact.

The IFI is neutral and independent due to its international funding base. This means the IFI is uniquely placed to play an important convening role in building peace not limited by the constraints that governments, political parties, and statutory agencies often work within. This enables the IFI to create and sustain spaces where connection builds understanding between people and communities. It fosters authentic partnerships across sectors, promotes sustained collaborative problem-solving and consensus building, both in Northern Ireland and across the wider border region.

This ambitious new 5-year strategy will enable vital peacebuilding to continue, to broaden in its innovation and reach, and to develop as new challenges and possibilities emerge.

In moving forward, this vital work will continue and the fullness of the IFI's resources and efforts will be directed toward the areas of greatest need and emerging opportunity, continuing to support long-term peace and equitable development across Northern Ireland and the wider border region. The cross-border work of the IFI in the past through the Wider Horizons Programme, the Communities in Partnership Programme has had transformational impacts on participants. This strategy will retain a strong cross-border dimension to continue building relationships and understanding between people and communities.

Why the International Fund for Ireland Does What It Does

01

Our Foundational Objective:

To promote economic and social advance and to encourage contact, dialogue and reconciliation between Nationalists, Unionists and others throughout Ireland.

02

Our Purpose:

To be an example at home and internationally of how economic and social advancement goes hand-in-hand with respectful, peaceful and creative connections between individuals, communities, sectors and organisations.

03

Our Vision:

A more joyful, inclusive and thriving society in a stable, democratic and economically prosperous environment for all in Northern Ireland and the border region.

04

Our Mission:

To connect, empower and invest in people and communities through initiatives that include co-design for a present and future that enables economic and social advancement and deepens cohesion, empathy and sustainable peace.

Tackling Both the Persistent and New Challenges Facing our Society

We are conscious that Ireland today, North and South, is enormously different from Ireland of 1986.



Incredible achievements have been made both towards peace and development. Some challenges remain disappointingly familiar, including persistent division between and within some of our communities and the disenfranchisement that comes from poverty in areas that have not benefited from the peace dividends post Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. Other challenges have emerged which seem wholly unfamiliar. In particular, the negative side of digital and online forms of communication, connection, information-sharing and identity-formation pose profound risks to individual wellbeing as well as to solidarity and democratic norms.

Some of the assumptions underpinning the original establishment of the International Fund for Ireland no longer fully reflect present realities, including changes in the island's demographic landscape and the evolving nature of the most significant threats to solidarity and stability.



In this context, the IFI's core purpose remains as relevant as ever, while the shifting environment warrants renewed strategic consideration of how its role, resources, and interventions can most effectively support long-term peace and cohesion.

This new strategy will support those in Northern Ireland and the southern border counties who want to build peace to do so in ways that respond to the realities of present-day society at ground level. At its core, the IFI has always been willing to take considered risks for peace and work with risk takers to help make a tangible difference to communities.

The IFI will strengthen this approach through welcoming creative and innovative actors, ideas and practices and finding new means for connection and development. Peacebuilding is not only about the conflict of the past but about preventing divisions and harms that may come in the future. In this sense, the work of the IFI has been truly unique, tackling the root causes of division and helping to build dialogue, culture and physical spaces needed to embed a positive peace in mind-sets and communities that are hard to reach. The IFI will continue to search out these places and people and strive for positive change.



For Those Who Want to Take Part in a Shared Present and a Fairer Future



We believe in the power of peacebuilding that has and will change lives and places. We recognise that this takes courage, commitment and human connectivity. We want to cultivate a society where living peacefully, and with consideration for future generations, is imagined, nurtured, championed, and valued as being essential to social and economic progress. This means actively investing in those who challenge the practices and norms that reinforce division and stagnation. We will search for, help and fund those who are committed to peaceful enterprise, whether that be in tried-and-tested or in freshly imaginative forms.

We do so in collaboration. We believe that creating space for connection, partnerships, co-design and sharing of learning is important both for those we fund and for our relationship with fellow

funders and agencies, institutions and organisations who are also invested in seeing sustained improvement in communities and places across Northern Ireland and the southern border counties.

We are privileged to have an incredible, unique foundation in 1986 – the International Fund for Ireland as the outworking of then-unprecedented collaboration between the British and Irish Governments and other international partners, including the United States Government, for the direct benefit of communities in Northern Ireland and the southern border counties. We recognise too the early stage investments from Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the EU.

Today, we can harness the collective learning from four decades of investing in peace to ensure that the IFI can conclude after half a century, having made a profound, durable and tangible contribution to reconciliation and economic and social advance in Ireland.

Values We Build Upon



The International Fund for Ireland's values guide how we work, the partnerships we build, and the impact we strive to achieve. These values shape every decision we make and every initiative we support.

1. Integrity and Intent

To listen, speak and act with integrity and with the intention of building trust and common purpose.

2. Shared Responsibility

To look out for one another and our environment, recognising that we all share this place and its future together, and that each of us has a part to play in that.

3. Compassion and Solidarity

To stand together in times of joy and challenge as one community, recognising that if harm is done to one group or part of society, it damages the body politic as a whole.

4. Courage to Challenge

To actively confront the barriers that divide or limit us, fostering understanding and progress through genuine dialogue and collaboration.

5. Transparency and Openness

To work in a transparent and open way, ensuring that our approach to project development and delivery is fair, inclusive, and accountable.

Strategic Objectives We Aim For

The key themes for this strategy are Regeneration, Creativity, Sharing and Empowerment.

Building on our experience and knowledge we will focus on the many new challenges and needs in the region.

We will do this while ensuring an appropriate focus on cross-border engagement and balanced support for all traditions and for both rural and urban environments. We will continue to take considered risks and work in areas that are difficult for other funders to reach.

Regeneration

To break patterns and assumptions that maintain and reproduce division and under-development, supporting approaches that actively build connections and foster economic and social advancement, that challenge barriers that divide us, strengthen safety, cohesion and civic participation, including in small but impactful ways.

Creativity

To inspire and promote new and fresh efforts to build peace, reconciliation and economic and social advance by creating new pathways for participation and action from individuals, groups and organisations. This will include those who may not have thought of themselves as peace builders but whose work actively contributes to the purpose and vision of the IFI.

Sharing

To reward the commitment and trust shown by the original funders of the IFI by proactively sharing learning, including co-created learning, both across the IFI projects, past and present, and with partners domestically and internationally, exchanging insights, and scaling what works. By gathering our learning and evidence through a knowledge bank and building legacy learning and implementation partnerships, the IFI will ensure it continues to inspire and inform change after its end.

Empowerment

To equip individuals of all identities and backgrounds for meaningful active participation and collaboration in the creation of a shared present and future, including by enhancing confidence and leadership opportunities, particularly for those marginalised by disadvantage, inequality and prejudice.

For each funding call, the Board will identify and publish priority thematic areas, clearly signalling the types of projects that will be given preference for support, in line with strategic objectives and emerging needs.

How We Will Work

The IFI will deliver the objectives of this strategy through a clear and transparent implementation model that supports innovation, builds trusted partnerships and ensures the effective use of funds. Our approach balances openness to new ideas with targeted investment in areas where long-term engagement and established relationships have demonstrated impact.

To achieve this, the IFI will operate two complementary delivery routes.

01

Managed Open Call

The Managed Open Call will provide a structured and transparent process through which organisations can propose projects aligned with the IFI's strategic objectives. This process is designed to identify and support new partners, broaden participation across sectors and communities, ensuring that the IFI continues to benefit from emerging ideas, local expertise and innovative approaches.

Open Calls will be issued biannually and will clearly outline the eligibility criteria for funding. Applications will be assessed through a robust evaluation process to ensure that proposals demonstrate:

- strong alignment with IFI strategic objectives;
- clear potential for measurable impact;
- value for money and effective use of resources; and
- capacity to deliver and sustain outcomes.

02

Direct Partnership Approach

Alongside the open call process, the IFI will utilise a Direct Partnership Approach. This will enable the IFI to work in a targeted and collaborative manner with organisations operating in areas of greatest need in Northern Ireland. Through this method, we will proactively engage with communities and organisations serving marginalised and disadvantaged groups to identify priority needs and opportunities for support.

We will work with organisations to co-design interventions that respond to local circumstances and align with the strategic objectives of the IFI. This collaborative process will ensure that initiatives are grounded in the realities of the communities they serve and are designed to deliver meaningful and sustainable outcomes.

A central element of this approach is capacity building. In addition to supporting specific projects or initiatives, the IFI will work with organisations to strengthen organisational capability, helping them to develop the structures, skills and partnerships necessary to sustain and expand their work over time.

Direct partnerships will allow the IFI to:

- co-design interventions with organisations to deliver on strategic objectives;
- continue to target investment in the areas of highest need in Northern Ireland; and
- respond strategically to emerging opportunities or challenges in the peacebuilding landscape.

Monitoring, Learning and Impact

Monitoring, evaluation and learning will remain central to how the IFI delivers this strategy. We are committed not only to supporting projects but also to understanding what works in building peace and reconciliation and ensuring that lessons learned inform future work.

All funded initiatives will be required to demonstrate clear objectives, defined outcomes and appropriate monitoring arrangements. We will work closely with funded organisations to track progress, ensure accountability for public funding and support effective project delivery.

