

NSW Premier's Department
with co-funding from The NSW Office for Youth

CONNECT IRL GRANTS PROGRAM

SUPPORTING OFFLINE CONNECTIONS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

GUIDELINES

November 2025

Acknowledgement of Country

NSW Premier's Department acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we work and live. We celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of NSW.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present and acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that contributed to the development of this grant guideline.

Grant Program Details	
Opening date and time	Monday 24 November 2025
Online information session	10:00am – 10:45am, Wednesday 10 December 2025
Closing date and time	11:59pm, Tuesday 20 January 2026
Application outcome date	17/04/2026
Project delivery timeframe (for successful applications)	12-24 months from execution of funding agreement
Evaluation timeframe (for successful applications)	Evaluation process commences at the execution of the funding agreement
Decision-maker	Deputy Secretary Delivery and Engagement, NSW Premier's Department
NSW Government Agency	Premier's Department
Type of grant opportunity	Open, competitive
Grant value (total available funding for the grant and the available individual grant amounts, excluding GST)	\$2 million in total funds available. \$10,000 to \$250,000 individual grants
Enquiries	connectedcommunities@premiersdepartment.nsw.gov.au

CONTENTS

Overview.....	1
Overview of grant/grants program.....	2
Purpose of the Grant.....	2
Grant Program Objectives	3
Grant value.....	3
Selection criteria	4
Eligibility criteria	5
Assessment criteria.....	5
Activities ineligible for funding under this grant.....	6
Application process	7
How to apply	8
Support available to applicants.....	8
Assessment process.....	9
Assessment of grant applications.....	10
Notification of application outcome	10
Publication of grants information	10
Successful grant applications.....	11
Grant agreement.....	12
Grant payment	12
Indicative reporting and acquittal requirements	12
Evaluation.....	12
Additional information and resources	14
Disclaimer.....	15
Access to information.....	15
Public liability Insurance	15
Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and Support and contact.....	15

1

Overview

OVERVIEW OF GRANT/GRANTS PROGRAM

Young people face increasing challenges in forming meaningful offline connections. A range of factors, including high digital engagement, limited access to safe spaces, and social and economic disadvantage, can contribute to isolation, loneliness and vulnerability. These issues are particularly pronounced for young people from marginalised or diverse backgrounds and identities.

Social media plays a complex role in this landscape. While it can offer vital support and connection it can also hinder offline identity development and increase feelings of disconnection. The NSW Social Media Summit (2024) highlighted the need to balance online engagement with opportunities for face-to-face interaction, noting links between high social media use and increased loneliness.

It also drew attention to the rise in online misogyny and gender-based harassment, which can further alienate young people from safe and supportive online and offline spaces.

The Commonwealth's Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024, which delays the age of access for those under 16, aims to protect children from online harms. However, concerns have been raised that such restrictions may unintentionally reduce access to support networks for vulnerable young people.

Beyond digital factors, broader systemic issues also impact youth connection. A NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness¹ found that young people in disadvantaged communities experience persistent social isolation, with serious consequences for mental health, education and employment. Recommendation 5 of the Inquiry's report calls for expanded peer support and mentoring programs, both online and in local communities.

Youth crime prevention efforts similarly emphasise² the importance of early intervention and trusted relationships. Recent inquiries³ recommend investment in youth hubs and mentoring to reduce offending and build resilience.

The NSW Mental Health Commission's strategy development process⁴ also identifies loneliness and disconnection as key issues, calling for community-based responses that promote wellbeing through connection.

The Connect IRL Grants Program is co-funded by the Premier's Department and the Office for Youth.

PURPOSE OF THE GRANT

The Connect IRL Grants Program aims to support young people including those who may be highly vulnerable, and are from isolated, marginalised and/or diverse communities by:

- building resilience and providing opportunities to strengthen one's identity, self-efficacy and mental health in the offline world
- creating spaces for young people with different backgrounds and/or lived experiences to connect with others offline
- creating opportunities to improve critical thinking, engage in respectful dialogue and build leadership capacity

¹ NSW Parliament Standing Committee on Social Issues, August 2025, Report no. 65, [The prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales](#).

² NSW Police Force – Youth Strategy 2023 – 2025

³ [Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety: Community safety in regional and rural communities – Interim report: Addressing the drivers of youth crime through early intervention](#)

⁴ [NSW Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy – Consultation Paper 2025](#)

- establishing trusted mentoring partnerships to support development of personal resilience and sustain offline connections
- including parents, carers and other trusted adults in the support ecosystem around young people to support long term outcomes for young people.

GRANT PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

The Premier's Department (the Department) will administer the Connect IRL Grants Program.

There are four program objectives:

1. **Strengthened offline connections** by delivering inclusive, pro-social activities and safe discussion spaces that support mental health, foster mutual understanding, reduce isolation, and build peer networks — particularly for those from marginalised, diverse, or geographically isolated communities.
2. **Improved young people's interpersonal, civic, and leadership skills** through structured mentoring programs that promote healthy relationships, empathy, mutual respect, and active civic participation.
3. **Enhanced mentor capabilities** by increasing skills, including trauma-informed and lived experience approaches, to enable mentors to more effectively support vulnerable young people in building resilience and confidence within a safe and impactful environment.
4. **Strengthened long-term support systems for young people** achieved by the inclusion of families/trusted adults leading to a sustainable and holistic support network available to participants beyond the span of the program.

A grant obtained through this program is a one-off payment with no guarantee of further funding after the completion of the project.

Successful organisations will need to enter into a funding agreement.

Funded projects must be delivered in full within 24 months of execution of their funding agreement.

The Department is responsible for administering this grant opportunity in accordance with the NSW Grant Administration Guide. See: <https://www.nsw.gov.au/grants-and-funding/grants-administration-guide>.

GRANT VALUE

A total of \$ 2 million (exclusive of GST) will be available under the Connect IRL Grants Program.

Individual grants of \$10,000 up to \$250,000 (exclusive of GST) will be awarded.

2

Selection criteria

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Grants will be assessed through a competitive application process and awarded to carefully selected organisations who clearly meet as many, if not all, of the grant program objectives and funding criteria.

This grant is only available for not-for-profit organisations that have an Australian Business Number (ABN) and have demonstrated services operating in NSW.

Applicants should demonstrate their not-for-profit status by being one of the following:

1. incorporated non-government organisations (not-for-profit)
2. registered Associations under an Act of Parliament
3. registered cooperatives under an Act of Parliament
4. a company limited by Guarantee
5. a company limited by shares (non-profit distributing)
6. a community-based organisation registered or established under an Act that is not-for-profit
7. an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Corporation registered under the Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006 (Cth).

Only eligible applications will proceed to assessment.

The following organisations are **not eligible** to apply for funding under this program:

8. individuals and sole traders
9. local councils
10. state and federal government departments and associated entities
11. for profit organisations and commercial enterprises
12. organisations with National Redress Scheme sanctions
13. if your organisation:
 - a. is subject to a winding up order or has an appointed administrator
 - b. has a pending/ongoing legal case
 - c. is bankrupt.

NSW Premier's Department considers other factors to determine that an organisation is ineligible for funding. These factors could include issues that could cause reputational damage or other risks to the NSW Government.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

Each application will be considered on its merits and assessed based on how well it meets the assessment criteria and how it is ranked against other applications. Applications will also be assessed on how well it meets a particular need as identified by the NSW Government.

Each application is assessed* against the following criteria:

1. Demonstrates how the proposal addresses the Grants Program Objectives as outlined in Section 1.
2. Demonstrates the capacity to engage and support young people who may exhibit high risk factors, or who may be isolated, marginalised and/or from diverse communities.
3. Demonstrates why the applicant is especially equipped to carry out the project, based on previous experience in delivering similar projects.

4. Demonstrates that the applicant can deliver the project on time and on budget, ensuring that the grant provision is consistent with the principle of value for money.
5. Demonstrates a commitment to co-design and consultation with young people as part of the funded project.

*Each criteria carries a 20% weighting towards the overall score

You will need to include the following supporting documents as well as your application form:

1. draft project budget
2. final reports, evaluations or other supporting documents of similar projects delivered by the organisation.

ACTIVITIES INELIGIBLE FOR FUNDING UNDER THIS GRANT

Funding **cannot** be used for:

1. seeking funding for an existing project. Extending or expanding a demonstrated program or pilot project may be considered
2. seeking funding to supplement, increase, or continue ongoing service delivery that is the core business of the organisation
3. an organisation's operating costs including office rent and administration costs. Consideration may be given to funding operating costs, including rental costs, where those costs are directly related to and required for the funded activity
4. reimbursement of expenses already incurred
5. covering existing debts or budget deficits of the organisation
6. party political activities
7. purchase of TVs, alcohol, tobacco products, gaming services, computer software, entertainment streaming
8. capital works and equipment purchases (for example, purchase of phones, computer hardware, laptops, tablets, routers, modems, webcams, entertainment systems, etc. will not be funded). Capital works that are minor in nature that do not require any development approvals, such as cosmetic improvement, furnishing and fittings related to the project may be considered. Buying minor equipment, materials, and consumables such as fuel, clothing, art supplies, and catering for the purpose of the project may be considered
9. commercial or fundraising activities
10. celebration of national or independence days, with the exception of key Australian days including ANZAC Day, Australia Day, and NAIDOC week
11. cash prizes or gifts
12. The National Redress Scheme has been created in response to recommendations by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The Scheme includes sanctions against those organisations who have been named and failed to join the National Redress Scheme. If your organisation has redress sanctions, then you cannot apply for Grant funds.

The Department may seek confirmation or clarification regarding a project's activities and funds sought as part of this program before the grant is awarded.

The Department, at its sole discretion, may take other factors into account to determine that an organisation is ineligible for funding. These factors may include, but are not limited to, personal or business issues that could cause reputational damage or other risks to the NSW Government, and poor past performance of the organisation or their key project personnel.

3

Application process

HOW TO APPLY

Grants will open on 24 November 2025 with applications submitted no later than 11.59pm Tuesday 20 January 2026. Late applications will not be accepted.

Applications will only be accepted via Smarty Grants.

Incomplete and/or non-compliant applications will not be progressed for assessment after the grant round has closed. Please read the assessment and eligibility criteria carefully before completing your application.

SUPPORT AVAILABLE TO APPLICANTS

Premier's Department will be offering an online information session to support applicants in understanding the process and expectations, and answer any questions. If you are interested in joining this session, please email connectedcommunities@premiersdepartment.nsw.gov.au for more information. A recording of the session will be made available for interested parties who are unable to make the session.

All queries not addressed by the FAQs can be submitted in writing to our team, via email to connectedcommunities@premiersdepartment.nsw.gov.au.

4

Assessment process

ASSESSMENT OF GRANT APPLICATIONS

Applications will be assessed by a panel convened by the NSW Premier's Department. The panel will include the NSW Office for Youth and representatives from other NSW Government agencies with subject matter expertise in supporting vulnerable young people and/or those from diverse and marginalised communities and delivering community youth programs, grants, and other community programs.

Panel members will need to declare actual and/or potential conflict of interests before participating in the assessment of applications. These declarations will be made to the Director, Connected Communities, NSW Premier's Department. Any identified conflicts will result in a panel member being excluded from the assessment process for that application. Applications will be first reviewed against the eligibility criteria by the assessment panel.

After its review, the panel will provide a written assessment report to the Deputy Secretary, Delivery and Engagement, NSW Premier's Department, on proposals it considers should be awarded the grants.

The Deputy Secretary of the NSW Premier's Department is the decision-maker for this grant and will decide on consideration of recommendations of the panel. The Deputy Secretary's decision is final in all matters, including:

1. the grant approval
2. the grant funding to be awarded
3. any conditions attached to the offer of grant funding.

NOTIFICATION OF APPLICATION OUTCOME

Applicants will be advised in April 2026 of the outcome of their application in writing via email.

Successful applicants will be notified and advised of any specific conditions attached to the grant.

Unsuccessful applicants will be notified in writing via email and will have the opportunity to seek written feedback on the application outcome.

PUBLICATION OF GRANTS INFORMATION

The Grants Administration Guide (Guide) requires that certain information is published in relation to grants awarded no later than 45 calendar days after the grant agreement takes effect (see section 6.5 of the Guide and Appendix A to the Guide). This information is also open access information under the *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009* (NSW) (**GIPA Act**), which must be made publicly available unless there is an overriding public interest against disclosure of the information.

In accordance with these requirements, relevant information about the grants awarded will be made available on the NSW Government Grants and Funding Finder as soon as possible after the grant funding is approved or declined.

All records in relation to this decision will be managed in accordance with the requirements of the *State Records Act 1998* (NSW).

5

Successful grant
applications

GRANT AGREEMENT

Grant recipients will be required to:

- attend an initial inception meeting
- provide an outline of how the proposed project will be evaluated
- provide the Department with relevant multimedia of the project where possible and with the consent of participants and/or their guardian. This may include videos, photos etc
- deliver their project by a date agreed with the Department
- acquit funds by a date agreed with the Department
- participate in forums and materials the Department may produce to share updates, insights, and learnings.

If funding is awarded, the Program Terms and Conditions will apply to the grant funding and outlined in the agreement.

Applicants will be required to:

- review the Terms and Conditions and declare in their application that they have read and understood them
- acknowledge that an agreement based on the Terms and Conditions will apply to the grant
- if awarded a grant, agree to comply with the Terms and Conditions in acquitting the grant.

Successful applications for funding must be delivered on time and on budget. No extensions to the completion deadline will be provided unless agreed to in writing by the Department

GRANT PAYMENT

Payment will be made in instalments in line with the grant deliverables as set out and agreed upon in the grant agreement.

Any unspent funds will be required to be returned to NSW Government.

INDICATIVE REPORTING AND ACQUITTAL REQUIREMENTS

The NSW Government requires consistent and accurate reporting of funding expenditure to ensure accountability. The provision of progress and completion reports are a condition of funding.

Grant recipients will be required to provide:

1. regular progress updates against agreed to deliverables and timelines
2. an acquittal letter, signed by the recipient organisation's appropriate delegate at the completion of the project.
3. A report that summarises the key learnings from the project, and includes an evaluation of the project, within three weeks after the project is completed
4. The evaluation should assess if the project was successful in achieving the project outcomes that it intended to address

EVALUATION

The Department expects that all programs and initiatives funded are evaluated.

The program logic (refer to figure 1.1 below) outlines the immediate outcomes, end of program outcomes and ultimate outcomes of the Connect IRL Grants Program.

Projects proposed under the Connect IRL Grants Program must align to the Program Logic.

Figure 1.1: Outcomes for Connect IRL



Note: Young people refers to youth 12-24 years old

Please note: proposals do not need to meet all outcomes listed on the program logic but must identify at least one (1) end of program outcome or immediate outcome that the proposal will address.

It is expected that the program logic be used as a guide to conduct an evaluation of the successful grants recipient's programs.

6

Additional information and
resources

DISCLAIMER

The terms and conditions for the grant will be contained in the funding agreement.

Submission of an application does not guarantee funding.

Applicants are required to pay the Department back unspent funds or those not spent in accordance with the funding agreement.

The Department accepts no responsibility for your project, irrespective of the funding provided by the agency to support the project, and irrespective of its listing on the Department website or other NSW Government publications.

Organisations are responsible for meeting their duty of care and all other obligations to project participants and other stakeholders.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

The GIPA Act provides for the proactive release of government information by agencies and gives members of the public an enforceable right to access government information held by an agency (which includes Ministerial offices). Access to government information is only to be restricted if there is an overriding public interest against disclosure.

The NSW Legislative Council has the power to order the production of State papers by the Executive Government. Standing Order 52 provides that the House may order documents to be tabled by the Government in the House. The Cabinet Office coordinates the preparation of the papers – that is, the return to order. The return to order may contain privileged and public documents. Privileged documents are available only to members of the Legislative Council.

Note that documents submitted as part of a grant application may be subject to an application under the GIPA Act or an order for papers under Standing Order 52.

PUBLIC LIABILITY INSURANCE

Funded organisations are required to provide a valid Certificate of Currency for Public Liability Insurance with a minimum cover of \$20 million in the name of the applicant before funding can be released.

The funded organisation is responsible for ensuring that it has appropriate insurance coverage in place for the project, equipment or activities, and its day-to-day operations. Funded organisations that employ staff must comply with relevant industrial relations and workplace health and safety requirements.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQS) AND SUPPORT AND CONTACT

Q: Do proposals require letters of support as references?

A: Applicants do not need to provide letters of support. Applicants may choose to upload a reference to previously successful projects of a similar nature to support their proposal.

Q: How much involvement will the Premier's Department have?

A: The Premier's Department expects to meet regularly with successful applicants to track the progress of the project against deliverables set out in the funding agreement. The frequency of meetings will be agreed upon by all parties involved.

Q: Do proposals need to address all Program Objectives areas listed in the grant guidelines?

A: Applicants may choose to address one or more Program Objectives; each proposal will be assessed on the merit and ability to meet outcomes rather than the breadth of areas applicants focus on.