



Local Democracy Reporting Scheme – Round 2

Publication date: August 15, 2025

This document contains an outline of the **Local Democracy Reporting Scheme** – Round 2 including

- a) The scheme's objectives;
- b) The parameters of the scheme and,
- c) How it will operate.

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1. Foreword

Coimisiún na Meán (“An Coimisiún”), Ireland’s commission for regulating broadcasters, online media and supporting media development, is committed to ensuring a thriving, diverse and creative media landscape. An Coimisiún, further to its Media Development function, develops and operates funding schemes to support the creation of journalism content that reflects and shapes Irish society, and which aims to support the media sector and strengthen its plurality.

The report of the Future of Media Commission (FOMC) recognised “the critical and valued role played by a strong, independent media sector in Irish civic and cultural life and in the democratic order”.

An overarching aim of the FOMC recommendations is to support a range of funding schemes for Public Service Content Providers on a phased basis including:

- Local Democracy Reporting Scheme (LDRS);
- Courts Reporting Scheme (CRS);
- News Reporting Scheme;
- Support for Digital Transformation;
- Access and Training Scheme and,
- Community Media Scheme.

In this context, and following the establishment of the Local Democracy and Courts Reporting Schemes last year, the second iteration (Round 2) of the Schemes has been established.

Some €10m was allocated in Budget 2025 to the Media Fund on an administrative basis, with €6m assigned to the operation of Round 2 of the LDRS and CRS.

2. Introduction

The Local Democracy Reporting Scheme (“the Scheme”) is a journalism support scheme operated by Coimisiún na Meán (“An Coimisiún”) and funded by the Exchequer.

The key objective of this Scheme is to ensure that local media can perform its vital role in reporting on public institutions and authorities where issues of importance to the public are considered. These include Local Authorities, Municipal District Councils, Joint Policing Committees, Regional Health Forums and other fora. In this context, it aims to support the creation of accessible high-quality public interest journalism, in both official languages of Ireland, by skilled journalists.

This will strengthen plurality, improve citizens’ access to trusted quality information on Irish public affairs, support the resilience of the news media sectors and enable free and open debate on matters of public import, while informing citizens and enabling them to participate in democratic society.

This is the second iteration of the Scheme.

This document sets out the key elements of the Scheme in terms of the role of An Coimisiún, the objectives, scope, available funding, and the operational processes. An Coimisiún will publish supporting documentation for potential applicants on the funding rounds and any associated development measures over the lifetime of the Scheme.



3. Role of An Coimisiún

3.1 Role of An Coimisiún

An Coimisiún is responsible for the management of the Scheme, including corporate governance and the disbursement of the funds. The level of funding has been determined by the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport and the allocation covers both the administration of the Scheme and funding grants.

The scheme will be implemented in accordance with State Aid Rules (SGEI decision) and, as set out in the European Commission Decision of December 20, 2012, the funding will only be allocated to projects that will provide public service content that supports public interest journalism for a diversity of Irish audiences, including in the Irish language, and thereby fulfil the public service obligations of the scheme.

3.2 Legislative Context for the Local Democracy Reporting Scheme

Section 7(5)(b) of the Broadcasting and Other Media Regulation Acts 2009 & 2022 empowers the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport to enter arrangements with An Coimisiún to set up schemes to 'stimulate the provision of high quality, diverse and innovative news and comment on current affairs'.

In this context, An Coimisiún has submitted to the Minister the second iteration of the scheme to grant funds to support all or any of the following **additional public interest journalism**:

- a) Comprehensive coverage of the proceedings of local authorities and associated committees;
- b) Reporting on the functions and activities of local authorities;
- c) Investigating publications and records to identify stories of public interest;
- d) Reporting on other matters relevant to local democracy which are in the public interest.

This funding support is primarily for increased media coverage of local democracy and public interest matters that is made available to all. In this context, in Budget 2025, €6 million was for the continuation of two journalism funding schemes, namely the Local Democracy Reporting Scheme and the Courts Reporting Scheme. An Coimisiún must ensure that not less than 30% of the total overall funding is allocated to the Local Democracy Reporting Scheme.

3.3 Definition of Public Interest Journalism

The definition of Public Interest Journalism for the purposes of this Scheme is, as outlined in the Future of Media Commission (FOMC) Report, "journalism with the primary purpose of recording, investigating and explaining issues of public significance in order to engage citizens in public debate and inform democratic decision making at all levels of government".



3.4 Scheme Objectives

The objectives of the Scheme are as follows:

- **Local Democracy:** contribute to sustaining and strengthening local democracy, including enhancing citizens' understanding, knowledge of and engagement with local public affairs;
- **Quality:** support quality independent public interest journalism on local democracy that is accurate and fair;
- **Plurality:** encourage and increase the creation of public interest journalism from a diverse range of sources;
- **Irish Language:** support this journalism in the Irish language, both within and outside Gaeltacht areas;
- **Additionality:** increase the availability of accurate and fair public interest journalism to citizens, on local democracy matters :
- **Local Media:** foster and encourage a robust local media sector and support collaboration across media service providers and across platforms (e.g. a local radio station and newspaper);
- **Gender, Equality, Inclusion and Diversity:** develop public interest journalism that is appropriately diverse, accessible, inclusive and representative of contemporary Ireland;
- **Environmental Sustainability:** support and encourage best practice in sustainability.

3.5 An Coimisiún's Approach to the Implementation of Funding Schemes

There are core values that underpin An Coimisiún's approach to the task of operating a scheme. An Coimisiún is obligated to be:

- Fair – in our processes, procedures, and decisions;
- Independent – operate impartially;
- Expert – by informing ourselves through engagement, research and a commitment to professional learning;
- Accountable – in our decisions, our governance, and our resources.



4. Scope of the Local Democracy Reporting Scheme

4.1 Public Interest Journalism

The Local Democracy Reporting Scheme will support public interest journalism on matters of local public affairs, on a platform neutral basis, which meets the requirements in terms of standards, commitment to public interest journalism, availability - most importantly for citizens – and re-use. (see Section 4.3 Eligible Criteria below).

4.2 Subject Matter

The Local Democracy Reporting Scheme offers funding support for the creation of additional quality public interest journalism on the following local public affairs matters:

- a) Comprehensive coverage of the proceedings of local authorities and associated committees;
- b) Reporting on the functions and activities of local authorities;
- c) Investigating publications and records to identify stories of public interest;
- d) Reporting on other matters relevant to local democracy which are in the public interest.

More consideration will be given to the latter two in the assessment of applications, cf. Assessment.

4.3 Eligibility Criteria

Applications to the Local Democracy Reporting Scheme may be submitted by media service providers of news and current affairs or by a freelance journalist in partnership with such a media service provider. The eligibility criteria set the minimum standards which must be achieved in order to be eligible to apply for funding.

- a) High-quality standards

An Coimisiún will only fund the creation of public interest journalism that demonstrates appropriate editorial expertise, capacity and track record. Membership of the Press Council of Ireland (print and online news platforms) or adherence to relevant An Coimisiún standards and Codes of Practice (broadcasting services) or other relevant EU regulatory body of media service providers is a prerequisite.

- b) Local public interest journalism commitment

An Coimisiún will expect an applicant to demonstrate a track record of, or a plan for, a sustained commitment to local public interest journalism and to demonstrate a means to distribute that journalism to the intended audience/s.

In this context, the core focus of the Local Democracy Reporting Scheme is to provide comprehensive coverage of the proceedings of local authorities. Funding will be allocated on a geographical basis, ie for each of the thirty-one (31) local authority areas.

Consideration will include due regard to the creation and distribution of public interest journalism in the Irish language. This will include regard to how the proposed public interest journalism in the relevant Gaeltacht Language Planning Area will benefit the Irish speaking community in that area.



c) Freely Available to the Irish public

All funded content must be made available to other media outlets and the Irish public free of charge no later than seven days after the publication of any funded content by the grantee, or earlier if the grantee so wishes, and uploaded to a central portal, operated on behalf of An Coimisiún.

An Coimisiún will make guidance and other supports available for users, including the standards and requirements for the submission of content, to the central hub.

In instances where a grantee charges for access to content on their service, such as a subscription fee or charge, the grantee must ensure that content funded by the Scheme is simultaneously available on such service for free.

d) Freely Available for Re-use and/ or Distribution

A grantee will be permitted to hold ownership and copyright on funded content produced as part of the Scheme for a period of seven days only, after which the content must be uploaded to the central hub. Others will then be free to share or use the funded content on the hub subject to attribution rules.

These include attribution requirements such as:

- the name and logo of the grant recipient
- the name of the authors/contributors to the public service content
- an accessible link (if published/made available online) to the original article; and
- any other matter considered appropriate by Coimisiún na Meán.

e) Access

The content funded under this funding scheme will be publicly available and will be accessible to all. An Coimisiún is currently developing access guidelines and will share these once they are available.

f) Exclusions

Funding will not be available to finance:

- Activities not directly related to the creation of additional public interest journalism content
- Current news activities/BAU
- The purchase of equipment or premises (capital funding)
- Depreciation.

4.4 Public Access to Funded Content

Public access to public interest journalism funded under the scheme is one of the key objectives and in the longer term, all funded public interest journalism will be available and archived, and publicly accessible to all on a central portal operated on behalf of An Coimisiún.

4.5 Ancillary Measure: Focus on Matters of Public Interest

An Coimisiún will continue to implement such ancillary measures as it deems appropriate to support the achievement of the objectives of this Scheme. This includes measures to assist media service providers undertake in-depth focus pieces or series on a broad range of issues arising from coverage of local authorities or other local democratic fora, or related matters. The preference is for cross-platform longform content.

Between 5% and 10% of the annual funding for the Schemes is being allocated to such projects or thematic works and is contestable on a national basis.

5. Amendments to the LDRS for Round 2

A number of amendments have been made to the LDRS which have been incorporated for Round 2 of the Scheme and are outlined below. Other amendments have been made to the operation and contract stages of the scheme and these will be outlined to applicants during those phases.

a) Funding allocation:

A minimum of 30% (previously 50%) of the €6m allocated for the second round of the two existing journalism schemes, namely the Local Democracy Reporting Scheme and the Courts Reporting Scheme, is to be made available to the LDRS.

b) Investigative local democracy journalism:

Greater weighting will be given in assessment to projects which propose to use local authority documentation (reviewing publications and records), follow-ups from council meetings, etc to identify and generate stories of public interest, on top of straightforward reportage on meetings.

c) Photography:

Applicants to Ancillary Measure Schemes will have the option to apply for funding for photography, as a means of enhancing such long-form content-focused projects, provided that the images, alongside the written content, are made available, free of charge and without restrictions to other parties wishing to re-use the relevant report.

d) Translation of funded content:

Irish language translation of funded content will be made available, on request, to regulated entities. The translation will be funded and supplied by An Coimisiún.

6. Funding

This section details the approach to funding awards under the scheme. It also highlights An Coimisiún's obligations under EU State Aid Rules and the obligation on grantees to acknowledge the source of funding.



6.1 Allocation of Funds within the Local Democracy Reporting Scheme

Funds will be awarded on the basis of the specific local government area/region for which the contract has been awarded and on a contestable basis, to applications which meet the eligibility criteria and align with the aims and objectives of the Scheme.

In this regard, An Coimisiún shall endeavour to allocate a minimum of one grant per area subject to the achievement of the required standards, and in deciding on any grant amount, regard will be given to a number of factors including population, number of municipal districts, plurality of sources of public interest journalism and so forth. The plurality of sources will have regard to the overall level of funding awarded to any one media service provider. In this context, An Coimisiún may take appropriate measures to limit the overall level of funding awarded to any one media service provider that has a number of media outlets, including across all platforms.

Due regard will be also given to creative and innovative proposals under the broad banner of local democracy reporting.

Collaboration between media service providers is also encouraged and will be given due regard.

6.2 Grant Types

An Coimisiún shall have the flexibility to determine, on a case-by-case basis in a given area, the most appropriate approach to the allocation of funding to grant applicants and has the discretion to award funding, as it sees fit, in any of the following ways:

- funding to a media service provider to enable it to engage a freelance journalist to deliver additional public service content;
- funding to a media service provider to allow a part-time employee be employed on a full-time basis to deliver additional public service content;
- funding to a media service provider to employ a new employee on a fixed-term contract to deliver additional public service content; and
- in addition, persons working as freelance journalists can apply directly for funding to deliver public service content.

Such an application would require a partnership with one or more appropriately regulated media organisations, who would guarantee to publish work produced by the freelancer.

The scheme requires that any contract of employment entered into between a media organisation and a journalist pursuant to the scheme does not exceed a period of 12 months.

In general, An Coimisiún will allocate grants under the Local Democracy Reporting Scheme that represent 100% of the eligible costs of the proposed journalism and directly associated editorial and overhead costs. Guidance documentation will be published for the funding round and will include detailed information on the grant award levels and budget templates setting out the permitted costs under the scheme, which will include regard to fair market-rates for journalists.



6.3 Obligations Under EU State Aid Rules

An Coimisiún must operate the funding scheme in accordance with the requirements of EU State Aid Rules and are applying the SGEI Decision (2012/21/EU). The compliance requirements include full transparency such as the publication of funding awards on Coimisiún na Meán's website and inclusion of the Scheme in a report submitted to the European Commission every two years. The Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment are the lead on this report and the Department will co-ordinate the return of information from An Coimisiún in this respect.

Further to Article 8 of the SGEI Decision, An Coimisiún must retain all required information regarding a funding award for the both the funding period and subsequently, for 10 years afterwards to ensure that a grant(s) can be inspected by the EC to determine compatibility with the SGEI decision.

6.4 Funding Rounds

An Coimisiún will allocate funding using a contestable funding rounds system. The number of funding rounds will depend on a range of factors, including availability of funding and possible future iterations of the Scheme.

6.5 Acknowledgement of Funding

Applicants in receipt of funding from An Coimisiún are contractually required to formally acknowledge this support in a format acceptable to An Coimisiún. An Coimisiún reserves the right to issue applicants with guidelines specifying precise requirements in this regard.

7. Application, Assessment and Awards

This section sets out the approach to the application and assessment process for the scheme and identifies the key principles informing these processes.

The primary concern for An Coimisiún is that the application, assessment, and award processes are transparent, equitable and verifiable. An Coimisiún has agreed and operated broad principles in respect of these processes across funding schemes as outlined below.

An Coimisiún will make information in relation to the processes and procedures for making applications, the assessment process, contracting and disbursement publicly available.

7.1 The Application Process

An Coimisiún will publish information on funding schemes and will include: details on how to make submissions, eligibility information, application timeframes, details of assessment criteria and other supplementary information as deemed appropriate.

7.2 The Assessment Process

The assessment process for the Local Democracy Reporting Scheme consists of the following four phases:

7.2.1 Preliminary Assessment



The preliminary evaluation ensures that an applicant is eligible for funding under the scheme. The focus here is to ensure that applicants have met minimum criteria and submitted all required documentation. Any applications that do not pass the preliminary assessment stage are disqualified and are not subject to further consideration.

7.2.2 Qualitative Assessment

Each application is assessed on its own merits in the context of the assessment criteria which will be set out in An Coimisiún's guidance documentation published to inform and support potential applicants when making a submission to the Local Democracy Reporting Scheme.

7.2.3 Strategic Assessment

In instances where there are more qualifying applications than funds available, An Coimisiún will have a further assessment phase. This will focus on achieving a balance in the overall package of funded projects in the context of the scheme objectives. The recommendations from the qualitative assessment will also be considered here. Final recommendations are then submitted to the Commissioners for ratification.

7.2.4 Commissioner Ratification

The final stage sees Coimisiún na Meán ratifying the overall package of applications recommended for funding with regard to fulfilling the objectives of the funding round.

7.3 The Award Process

Where An Coimisiún has approved an application for funding the following steps apply:

- i. An Coimisiún informs the applicant of the decision, setting out any condition(s) attached to the offer.
- ii. An Coimisiún will make public a list of the funding offers ratified by the Commissioners.
- iii. The successful applicant must confirm their acceptance of the offer of funding and any condition(s) attached thereto by An Coimisiún.
- iv. A successful applicant is required to enter into a contractual agreement with An Coimisiún, on terms to be specified by An Coimisiún. Such terms include a schedule relating to the drawdown of funds by the applicant. Funds are administered by An Coimisiún in accordance with the terms of the contractual agreement.

Where An Coimisiún has rejected an application for funding, applicants are notified individually and provided with feedback on the performance of their application in the assessment process.

An Coimisiún will develop a standardised points system to inform the evaluation of applications, and the feedback provided to an applicant.

8. Review of the Local Democracy Reporting Scheme

A full and comprehensive review of Round 1 of the Local Democracy Reporting Scheme will be completed after 12 months of the full operation of the scheme, following the awarding of contracts. An Coimisiún will review the operation, effectiveness and impact of the Scheme and make a written report to the Minister.



This evaluation of the pilot phase, which will incorporate such elements of Round 2 as are relevant and possible to evaluate within the timeframe, will inform policy development of future iterations of the Scheme.

