

Website Improvement Programme

A training and investment programme to help Visitor Attractions and Activity Providers in Ireland's Hidden Heartlands to win more customers by improving their websites

Application Guidelines



**Ireland's Hidden
HEARTLANDS**

For Investment Grants from €3,000 up to €30,000

About Ireland's Hidden Heartlands

The Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand has been developed by Fáilte Ireland to grow the visitor economy of the Midlands. Ireland's Hidden Heartlands seeks to deliver on the brand promise outlined below.

Brand Promise

Get active at your own relaxed pace in the natural rural beauty of Ireland's central heartlands, along scenic waterways and walking trails, discovering what this under explored region and its welcoming rural communities have to offer.

Fáilte Ireland's goal is to deliver on this promise at every point of interaction with the visitor. The vision for Ireland's Hidden Heartlands is to deliver sustainable growth to all areas of the Midlands which will achieve real benefits for local communities and businesses and provide a focus for the protection of the environment, upon which tourism depends.



What is the aim of the Website Improvement Programme?

The purpose of the Website Improvement Programme is to improve the web skills of operators of visitor attractions and activity providers and to fund necessary improvements to their websites.

86% of visitors to Ireland book everything independently without the use of an Agent and 92% of all visitors use the internet to research information about the destinations they are traveling to.

As a visitor attraction or activity provider can you really afford not to be coming up in search results?

And when visitors do visit your website do you provide the right content and use the right tactics to capture a sale?

The Website Improvement Programme is about providing you with a range of free and heavily funded supports to help your business thrive in the online world.

This is what is included as part of the Programme:

- **FREE review of your website** - We tell you what is wrong and what needs to change.
- **FREE workshops** - You get trained by some of the leading Digital Marketers in Ireland.
- **FREE 1 to 1 online consultancy** - You get direct 1 to 1 feedback/support.
- **75% funding towards eligible costs for capital investment in your website** - You only need to contribute 25% to any eligible costs for improving your website.

The specific aims of the Website Improvement Programme are:

1. To improve the attractiveness of the region as a whole by improving the websites of visitor attractions and activity providers, which are the 'shop windows' for the brand.
2. To improve conversion rates by the visitor on their path to purchase by enhancing the first impressions they get from key supplier websites.
3. To improve the quality of online content among a range of tourism providers business in Ireland's Hidden Heartlands in line with its brand proposition.
4. To improve the online analytical and web optimisation capabilities of key visitor attractions and activity providers, and to make sure every website is optimised to drive more traffic, improve engagement on the site and drive more enquiries/revenue, especially via mobile devices.

This Programme is limited to approximately 40 businesses. Participants will be selected through a simple application process.

Setting Standards

As part of the Website Improvement Programme, Fáilte Ireland will prepare a set of standards and a checklist of items, against which each participating website will be reviewed and rated.



The following are examples of just some of the categories within the checklist:

Design and Content

- Overall website design
- User Experience
- Content
- Path to Purchase
- Cross-promotion
- Foreign language provision

Technical Review

- Traffic generation
- Technical audit
- GDPR compliance

Offsite review

- Social media
- Google My Business & Search engine ranking
- Review Sites

Mobile Usability

- Speed
- Navigation
- User Experience
- Content
- Conversion Rates

Are you eligible to apply?

To apply, you must be an existing visitor attraction or activity provider, operating within the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands region, that has an operating website i.e. the website was live on the **1st of June 2019**.

The programme is open to the following sectors:

- **Private Sector:** companies and other legal entities and individuals.
- **Voluntary Organisations:** not-for-profit bodies, including charities, trusts and companies limited by guarantee.
- **Public Sector Bodies:** semi-state organisations and local authorities.

The following are the minimum eligibility criteria that will apply to this programme:

1. **Location:** You must be operating a visitor attraction or be an activity provider located within the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands tourism region.
2. **Business Type:** Accommodation providers are not eligible to apply. However, attractions such as historic houses that offer accommodation, in addition to guided tours of the property and are, therefore, primarily attractions, are eligible to apply.
3. **Networks:** Groups of visitor attractions and/or activity providers that have organised themselves as a network and have a website are eligible to apply.
4. **State Aid:** You must not be in breach of State Aid rules with regard to De Minimis regulations or the General Block Exemption Regulations, as appropriate.
5. **Website Ownership:** You must own the website in question. You will be asked to verify this as part of Step 2 of the process.
6. **Match Funding:** You must commit to the required minimum proportion (25%) of match funding. You will be asked to provide evidence that you have the level of match funding required when you are applying for an investment grant at Step 5 of the process.
7. **Tax Clearance:** You must provide your Tax Clearance Number and you must be tax compliant.

Please note that Fáilte Ireland reserves the right to seek verification of any information provided.

Ineligible applicants

The following types of businesses and websites are ineligible under this programme:

- Accommodation businesses, with the possible exceptions outlined above at point 2.
- Festivals and events.
- Driving or touring routes.
- Restaurants, cafes, shops, etc.
- Visitor information offices.
- Community information websites.
- County tourism websites.
- Individual sports clubs.

What costs are eligible and ineligible?

The following are examples of the type of work and costs that are **eligible** for funding:

- Replacement/upgrade of existing website.
- Replacement/upgrade of content on your website including imagery and video.
- Building a responsive website to ensure it is mobile optimised.
- Costs associated with improving Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and website content.
- Works necessary to improve conversion rates for websites with online booking functionality and / or improving user experience (UX).
- Costs associated with foreign language provision.

The following costs are **not eligible** for funding:

- Website hosting fees or any other ongoing website management costs.
- Purchase of online advertising.

What are the Investment Grant Rates and Amounts?

- The maximum investment grant rate will not exceed 75% of eligible capital costs. An additional 5% may be added to this in accordance with a potential partial refund of match funding costs at Step 8.
- The grant amount offered may be less than that requested by the applicant and is at the full discretion of Fáilte Ireland.
- The maximum individual grant amount available is €30,000.
- The minimum grant amount which you must be in a position to apply for is €3,000 i.e. every applicant must incur at least €4,000 of eligible costs.

Note: Any offer of financial assistance by Fáilte Ireland is subject to Failte Ireland's budget availability and prioritisation.

How the Programme works

The following are the steps that will be taken in implementing the Website Improvement Programme:

Step 1: Getting and Completing the Expression of Interest Form

You must first check your eligibility for the programme by reading these guidelines and by checking with the Hidden Heartlands team at IHH@failteireland.ie. If you are considered to be eligible you will be given access to an online Expression of Interest form. A final decision on your eligibility will be made by Fáilte Ireland following receipt of the Expression of Interest form. Expression of Interest forms that are received after the closing date will not be accepted.

When completing your Expression of Interest form, you will be required to give your consent to provide Fáilte Ireland and its consultants with read-only access to your website and its analytics.

The closing date for receipt of Expressions of Interest is Wednesday the 24th July at 12.00 noon.

Step 2: Selection of participants

The programme will be limited to approximately 40 participants. Eligible completed Expression of Interest forms will be evaluated on a competitive basis, taking into account the aims and requirements of the Programme. Where demand exceeds availability on the programme, Fáilte Ireland will select those applicants that have the greatest number of visitors (which may be verified by Fáilte Ireland), those that have the greatest proportion of international visitors, and also have what Fáilte Ireland considers to be the greatest need for improvements to their websites.

All successful applicants to the programme will be notified by Fáilte Ireland. Based on the evaluation process, not all applicants will necessarily proceed to Step 3 - and subsequent steps - of the programme.





Step 3: Website review and preparation of a Website Improvement Plan

If you are approved to proceed to Step 3, consultants engaged directly by Fáilte Ireland will undertake a review of your website. This will assess content, layout, user experience, search engine optimisation (SEO), etc. against benchmarked standards identified by Fáilte Ireland. It will also assess your social media footprint.

At this step, you must provide Fáilte Ireland and its consultants with read-only access to your Google Analytics / Google Search Console. These can be installed if not already available. This is necessary to measure the impact of the improvements that will be made to your website.

Based on the review, Fáilte Ireland's consultants will prepare a draft Website Improvement Plan which will detail the improvements that are required to your website. The full cost of preparing the Website Improvement Plan will be covered by Fáilte Ireland.

Step 4: Training Workshops

In Autumn 2019, you will be required to attend two mandatory workshops, to address the improvement of online content and web optimisation.

The workshops will result in the further development of the Website Improvement Plan by you. One-to-one support will also be provided to you by Fáilte Ireland's consultants to help finalise your Website Improvement Plan.

Fáilte Ireland's consultants will sign off each Website Improvement Plan on behalf of Fáilte Ireland.

Step 5: Application for investment funding

Having completed Steps 1-4, you must now complete a short online application form in order to apply for investment funding from Fáilte Ireland to implement your Website Improvement Plan.

This must be accompanied by (a) your Website Improvement Plan, and (b) a proposal and financial quote which you will seek from a suitably qualified professional web consultant (third-party supplier) who will implement your Website Improvement Plan. In seeking a quote for this work you must adhere to public procurement rules.

At this step, you will also be required to submit your company constitution and company accounts for the last two years.

Fáilte Ireland will evaluate your application and determine the grant amount which will be offered. Grant amounts will be approved to a maximum of 75% funding of the eligible costs actually incurred and paid by you and requiring at least 25% funding from you. Following the evaluation process, we will issue a Letter of Offer of funding to you informing you of the grant amount that will be offered.

All terms and conditions attaching to a grant offer will be set out in the Letter of Offer.

Step 6: Project implementation

Once you have accepted the terms of the Letter of Offer issued by Fáilte Ireland, you can then begin to implement your Website Improvement Plan through your appointed third-party supplier. The Website Improvement Plan must be implemented within 12 weeks of the date of the Letter of Offer, unless an alternative date is agreed with Fáilte Ireland.

You, together with your appointed consultant, must consult closely with Fáilte Ireland and its consultants during the implementation of the Website Improvement Plan.

Once the plan has been implemented, Fáilte Ireland will review the website improvements undertaken prior to any payment being made. Where Fáilte Ireland is not satisfied with the nature or level of implementation, changes will have to be made to the satisfaction of Fáilte Ireland prior to sign-off and payment.

Depending on the extent of the works to be undertaken, staged payments of the grant may be considered.

Step 7: Final reporting

Following the implementation of the Website Improvement Plan, Fáilte Ireland's consultants will review the analytics of your website and will contact you to get feedback on the impact of the project on your business.

We will also undertake a final survey to gather qualitative feedback across areas such as new knowledge acquired in online/digital presence and optimisation, understanding of SEO in general, your ability to make direct changes to your website, and future plans for the development, management and use of your website for the promotion and sales of your business, as well as the local area and Ireland's Hidden Heartlands.

Step 8: Ongoing website maintenance and improvement

18 months after the final payment of the investment grant, we will undertake a further review of your website and, if your website and associated analytics have been maintained to a satisfactory standard, we will award a refund of your match funding contribution of 5% of the total cost of the eligible work undertaken. You must spend this additional funding on further upgrading the content of your website.

Please Note

To be eligible for funding successful applicants must participate in all elements of the Website Improvement Programme.

How to claim your grant

Once you are ready to claim the grant, we will issue you with a grant claims form.

Grant payments can only be made retrospectively to the applicant specified as the grantee in the Letter of Offer that will issue following Step 5 above and will be based on eligible expenditure actually incurred and paid by the grantee.

You must have current tax clearance from Revenue at the time of your claim or Fáilte Ireland will be unable to make a payment. Fáilte Ireland will carry out normal verification checks on the claim before the grant is paid.

You will be required, at the time of the grant claim, to certify that the project has not applied for, nor is it in receipt of additional grant-aid from any other source.

The timing of the grant payments is subject to Fáilte Ireland being in receipt of sufficient Exchequer funding to meet the payments. In the event of any delays in such funds, there will be no liability on the part of Fáilte Ireland or the Exchequer to make good any shortfall experienced.

Full details of the grant claiming process will be provided with the Letter of Offer that successful applicants will receive at Step 5.

Appeals

If you have been unsuccessful at Step 2 of the process (Expression of Interest stage), you should discuss the outcome of the process with a member of the Hidden Heartlands team. If, following this, you still wish to appeal the decision, you must write to the Appeals Officer, Fáilte Ireland, Áras Fáilte, 88-95 Amiens Street, Dublin 1, within 20 working days from the date of the notification at Step 2. The letter should state the grounds for the appeal and must contain reasons or evidence supporting the appeal. A decision will be made by the Appeals Officer within 20 working days and their conclusion and recommendations will be communicated to you in writing within 7 working days of their decision.

Note: the decision is full and final in relation to the grant amount awarded.

State Aid Basis

Grants provided under this programme are granted in accordance with the criteria set out in these Guidelines, subject to EU State aid law. This Programme is operating under the De Minimis Regulation and the General Block Exemption Regulation (GBER). The following GBER block exemptions may be drawn on:

- Culture and Heritage Conservation and Consultancy Aid
- Aid for Sport and Multifunctional Recreational Infrastructure.

The State Aid basis (De Minimis or GBER) for awarding individual grants under this Programme will be decided by Fáilte Ireland. In order for Fáilte Ireland to maintain De Minimis records, all applicants must complete a De Minimis Declaration, which will be supplied by Fáilte Ireland, if they are successful at the Expression of Interest Stage (Step 2 of the process).

Separately, as a public body, Fáilte Ireland is subject to the rules of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform Circular 13/2014.

Any additional information required about the Programme in general can be sought by emailing IHH@failteireland.ie. Successful applicants will also receive additional relevant information at the Programme workshops.



The closing date for receipt of Expressions of Interest is Wednesday 24th July at 12.00 noon.

**2nd Floor Fairgreen House,
Greenbridge, Mullingar,
Co. Westmeath, N91 V5WC
email IHH@failteireland.ie**



**Ireland's Hidden
HEARTLANDS**