



Circular 0060/2021

To: The Managerial Authorities, Principals and Teachers of Recognised Primary, Secondary, Community and Comprehensive Schools, the Chief Executives of Education and Training Boards.

GRANT SCHEME FOR EU NRRP FUNDING TO SCHOOLS TO ADDRESS THE DIGITAL DIVIDE, and LEARNERS AT RISK OF EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

Introduction and Purpose

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) has been developed by the Government to enable Ireland to access funding under the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility.

The Recovery and Resilience Facility is the largest component of NextGenerationEU which is the European Union's response to the global pandemic. The aim is to help repair the immediate economic and social damage brought about by the pandemic and to prepare for a post-Covid Europe that is greener, includes improved digitisation, is more resilient and fit to face the future.

The Department of Education was successful in securing €50m under this funding facility for the issue of a once-off grant to recognised primary and post-primary schools in the free education scheme. The focus of this funding will be to enable schools to **address the needs of learners at risk of educational disadvantage arising from a lack of access to necessary digital infrastructure.**

This funding is specifically targeted at supporting learners at risk of **educational disadvantage** through lack of access to digital technology. Schools should plan for the effective and targeted use of this funding as part of their Digital Learning Plan (DLP). It is important that schools review and revise their DLP to incorporate the specific intentions for this funding to ensure purposeful investment aligned to their overall strategic goals for enhanced digital capacity for all learners.

Features of the Grant Scheme

- The mechanism used to calculate the amount of grant funding issuing is weighted in favour of schools in the DEIS programme in keeping with the commitments in the NRRP. Schools are grouped by enrolment size, and a standard lump sum is applied based on enrolment. Further information can be found in the Appendix.
- All recognised primary and post-primary schools in the Free Education Scheme are eligible for this funding.



- Funding must be used for the purchase of ICT infrastructure to target learners at risk of educational disadvantage due to lack of access to relevant digital technologies that facilitate and support participation, attendance and retention and to ensure equity of access to the curriculum. Schools are required to use established public procurement arrangements. Further information on appropriate equipment, and procurement issues, including relevant links, are outlined in the Appendix.
- The scheme is supported by the provision of technical and procurement guidance and information for schools and their leaders.
- Records of expenditure and supporting documentation must be retained and be available for inspection, as outlined.
- Schools must ensure compliance with Circular: 13/2014 Management of and Accountability for Grants from Exchequer Funds.

Additional Information/Queries

Detailed guidance and information is outlined in the Appendix attached to this Circular.

Queries in relation to the operation of this grant scheme should be addressed to ictpolicy@education.gov.ie.

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APPENDIX:

How to use this funding

This funding is intended to support learners at risk of educational disadvantage as a result of the digital divide. Even before school closures, evidence shows that almost one third of the world's young people were already digitally excluded (UNESCO, 2020). While there is a gap between educational outcomes and retention between DEIS and non-DEIS schools, there is some evidence to suggest that this gap has widened due to the impact of school closures and lack of devices. The digital divide can not only mirror but can exacerbate existing socio-economic gaps.

Schools are advised to implement innovative solutions to tackle the digital divide and benefit learners and to expand capacity and opportunity for all learners to engage fully with the use of digital technology in teaching and learning. A particular emphasis will be on initiatives addressing learners impacted by socio-economic factors, and minority groups including the traveller community, Roma community, and learners in direct provision. Encouraging participation by girls in STEAM activities can also be a feature of any such solutions. In addition to provision of schemes to loan digital infrastructure to learners if required, further approaches are outlined below.

Possible approaches for Projects/Programmes/Activities, with additional supports for learners at risk of educational disadvantage:

- This funding can be utilised to support learners at risk of educational disadvantage due to a digital divide and who require access to ICT infrastructure to engage with learning both inside and outside the classroom.
- At primary level, activities such as those to support numeracy, problem solving and computational thinking, using technology such as robotics, coding and so on; activities to support literacy, and curriculum delivery of subjects such as history using digital storytelling. Support for languages through apps such as Duolingo, and Sraith Pictúir.
- At post-primary level, support for expansion of capacity and opportunity for STEAM subjects and projects, such as Junior Cycle Short Courses in Coding and Digital Media Literacy; at Senior Cycle for subjects such as Design Communications Graphics, Computer Science, Leaving Cert PE and so on.
- General STEAM projects and activities using innovative technology such as virtual or augmented reality, and game-based learning.
- Support to expand the use of Digital Portfolios, and provide opportunities to develop digital skills.
- At post primary-level, support for the CBA process.



- Digital technology can also support wellbeing activities.

To see video examples of schools who are embedding technology in their practice, using many of the approaches listed here, visit the PDST Technology in Education Good Practice videos: Primary: <https://www.pdsttechnologyineducation.ie/en/Good-Practice/Videos/Primary/> and Post Primary: <https://www.pdsttechnologyineducation.ie/en/Good-Practice/Videos/Post-Primary/>

Guidance for expenditure on infrastructure under this scheme

- It is advised that any such infrastructure, including equipment, is the property of the school and where devices are provided to a learner, this should be governed by a loan arrangement agreed between the school and parent/guardian. This agreement should include arrangements for the return of any such equipment when no longer required by the learner.
- The use of such infrastructure is also subject to the School's Acceptable Usage policy. As the infrastructure is the property of the school, the school's management authority will have responsibility for maintenance, repair, insurance etc. of the infrastructure.
- The arrangement whereby equipment is loaned to learners for use outside of the school must be approved by the management authority.
- Where additional software licenses are needed to facilitate engagement by learners outside of school hours, this funding can be utilised. Any such licenses are the property of the school, and the use of such software is subject to the School's Acceptable Usage policy.
- Where learners at risk of educational disadvantage require access to ICT infrastructure within the school outside of school hours, this should be in accordance with individual school policies and arrangements and in line with Department of Education Guidelines on the use of School Buildings outside of School Hours (2017).
- Within schools where the use of digital technologies may provide specific support and opportunities for those learners who may otherwise not engage, this funding can be utilised to equip additional spaces to facilitate this, and also to provide for specific devices and software.

Types of infrastructure covered under this funding.

- Computing devices: These may include desktop PCs, laptops, tablets or hybrid devices. These can include equipment for the provision of DCG.
- Cloud based tools and applications including learning platforms to provide additional supports for at-risk learners.
- Local software or 'apps', and online resources, to support learning.



- Other ICT Equipment/peripherals: This can include relevant and fit for purpose ICT elements to be used to support teaching, learning and assessment. An indicative (though not exhaustive) list includes audio visual equipment such as still and video cameras, digital cameras, speakers, interactive presentation technologies, visualisers, projectors and equipment including mobile laptop/tablet trollies, printers.

Computer Rooms (if needed to support learners at risk of educational disadvantage):

- Each computer room should be equipped with a sufficient computing devices (desktop PCs, laptops, or tablets), printer, digital projector, interactive flat screens (IFS) computational thinking equipment and any other equipment deemed to be appropriate to support digital skills development.
- The choice of computing devices is one for the school. Schools may use PCs, laptops, tablets equipment to enhance computational thinking, literacy, creativity or combination of these.

Requirement to report on the usage of this funding

As this funding has been secured through the EU NRRP Facility to address the digital divide, schools will be required to submit a record of how the funding was utilised to address the needs of learners at risk of educational disadvantage through the digital divide in their school, before the end of the school year. Schools should retain a record of how this funding is utilised.

Schools should acknowledge receipt of the EU NRRP funding on their website and provide a description outlining the activities, and/or schemes, this funding has been used to support.

Annual Account Returns

All recognised Primary, Voluntary Secondary, Community and Comprehensive schools are required to submit accounts to the Financial Support Services Unit (FSSU) annually. This satisfies the requirement under Section 18 of the Education Act 1998 for schools to make available their accounts for inspection by the Minister. These accounts include details of all income and expenditure including ICT funding. Validation on the information provided in the accounts is carried out, and can include audits in individual schools as part of the monitoring and controls over funding provided to schools.

The Annual Financial Statements of the ETBs are audited by the C&AG and are laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas, while the Internal Audit Unit for the ETB sector provides assurance to the Audit Committee of the ETBs that the system of internal control as implemented by executive management is adequate and operates effectively.



Automatic Issue of €50 million ICT NRRP funding

- 1) This grant will be paid directly into the school bank account, based on the eligibility criteria outlined. Schools are not required to apply for this funding. As with all exchequer grant-aid, school authorities must be able to provide detailed records on how funding, provided under this scheme, was spent. All expenditure in connection with the scheme must be vouched and schools must be able to prove that expenditure was used on infrastructure allowed under the scheme. Invoices and receipts must be retained in the event of an audit inspection by the Department and/or the Comptroller and Auditor General. It is necessary for schools to keep details of quotations received, invoices, receipts and any other relevant records in respect of all expenditure for a period of seven years. This *Appendix* contains details of the nature of records to be maintained. Schools, on request, must provide the Department with a written statement of the expenditure of the grant and any remaining balances and other relevant information. If a school closes permanently, any balance held in the account must be surrendered to the Department on the date that the school ceases operation. The Department reserves the right to withhold future payments to schools for non-compliance with any of the terms of this Scheme.
- 2) The ICT infrastructure selected for purchase must be in compliance with the broad list of authorised infrastructure as set out at Section 3 in this Appendix.
- 3) Schools must ensure compliance with Circular: 13/2014, Management of and Accountability for Grants from Exchequer Funds. Please refer to: [DPER-Circular-13-14-Guidance-Note-and-Reporting-Requirements-1](#).

Grant Rates Information

Primary

Enrolment	Grant – Non DEIS	Grant - DEIS
0 to 99	€5,000	€10,000
100 to 249	€8,000	€16,000
250 to 499	€13,360	€26,720
500 to 749	€22,311	€44,622
750 plus	€37,260	€74,519



Post-Primary

Enrolment	Grant – non DEIS	Grant - DEIS
0 to 249	€8,000	€16,000
250 to 499	€13,360	€26,720
500 to 749	€22,311	€44,622
750 plus	€37,260	€74,519

Tender Procedures and Record keeping

All purchases must be in compliance with Public Procurement Procedures. Existing ICT purchasing Frameworks should be engaged with and taken advantage of as they simplify the process of purchasing ICT equipment for schools. Instructions to assist schools in ordering using the Framework mechanism are contained in OGP Guides. Schools should contact the Schools Procurement Unit for further information and support as required at www.spu.ie. Care should be taken to ensure that identical technical specifications are presented to all vendors at the time of request for written quotations.

The OGP, in consultation with the Schools Procurement Unit, the ETBI, and PDST-TiE, has established a direct drawdown mechanism for schools to purchase Desktop and Laptop computers, and Hybrid Devices, meaning schools do not have to obtain quotes. Further information available at www.spu.ie.

Information on current ICT Frameworks is available at www.spu.ie. In order to access links on the OGP site, schools should register as buyers on the OGP Procurement website www.ogp.gov.ie.

When purchasing equipment for which no ICT framework exists, schools are advised to contact the Schools Procurement Unit to seek further advice and information. Also schools should refer to the PDST Technology in Education advice sheets in respect of their technical requirements: <http://www.pdsttechnologyineducation.ie/en/Technology>, then seek best value for money by sourcing written quotes in accordance with public procurement rules.

Schools should refer to the School Procurement Unit **Guidance for Schools on Good Procurement Practices** document available on the SPU website www.spu.ie and the Office of Government Procurement information at www.ogp.gov.ie.



Role of Board of Management

The Board of Management must establish a set of procedures governing purchasing and should set out the arrangements for tendering and buying of goods, payment of invoices and maintenance of accounting records. These rules are clearly set out in the Guidance for Schools on Good Procurement Practices available to download from this link - <https://www.spu.ie/publications-2/procurement-guide/>.

Support and Information

Digital Learning Planning

- Information on Digital Learning Planning for schools can be found at www.pdsttechnologyineducation.ie/planning and through the dedicated www.dlplanning.ie website which has been developed to support schools to embed digital technologies into teaching, learning and assessment).
- If schools have specific queries in relation to Digital Learning Planning, they can raise them via <https://dlplanning.ie/contact/>.

ICT Guidance and information

- ICT advice on suitable technologies can be found at www.pdsttechnologyineducation.ie/technology.
- If schools have specific queries in relation to ICT advice these queries can be emailed to ictadvice@pdst.ie.

Resources for teachers using digital technologies for teaching and learning

- The Department's official Portal for Irish education (**www.Scoilnet.ie**) provides in excess of 21,000 high quality digital resources aligned with the primary school curriculum and the post primary subject specifications which can be used by teachers for teaching and learning.
- Videos demonstrating good practice in the use of digital technologies to support a number of teaching approaches and methodologies are available at <https://www.pdsttechnologyineducation.ie/en/Good-Practice/Videos/>. If you would like to share videos of good practice in the embedding of digital technologies in teaching and learning in your school, send a brief email outlining your practice to technologyineducation@pdst.ie

CPD

- Information relating to professional development on the use of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment <https://www.pdsttechnologyineducation.ie/en/Training/> and through your local education centre at www.esci.ie and the relevant social media channels of these organisations



- Further professional development programmes on the use of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment will be developed over the period of the Strategy.

Other websites

There are other websites that provide helpful advice and information on the use of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment:

- <http://ncse.ie>
- <http://www.jct.ie> and www.juniorcycle.ie
- <http://www.ncca.ie/en/>
- <https://teachercpd.ie/>
- <https://www.webwise.ie/> - information, advice and free education resources addressing a range of internet safety issues and concerns, for young people, teachers and parents.

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