

Ayrshire Rural and Islands Ambition (ARIA) Fund



Main Fund Applicant Guidance

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1. Introduction

Welcome to the Ayrshire Rural and Islands Ambition (ARIA) Fund. The fund replaces previous EU rural development fund LEADER and forms part of the Scottish Government's Community Led Local Development (CLLD) programme. It involves similar bottom-up decision making to Ayrshire LEADER, delivered by representatives from the local area: the Local Action Group (LAG).

Fund Structure

Body	Role
ARIA Fund LAG	Fund leads, decide on all aspects of fund including grant allocation.
South Ayrshire Council	Lead Partner - administers funds/manages staff on behalf of LAG.

This document provides applicant guidance for the main ARIA fund process and **should be read carefully before applying.**

2. Pre-Application Engagement with ARIA

Applications will only be considered where an Expression of Interest has first been submitted via the ARIA website: [ARIA - Ayrshire Rural & Islands Ambition Fund |](#)

3. Key Dates

- **Monday 20th April 2026:** Open for Expressions of Interest
- **Friday 22nd May 2026:** Closing date for Expressions of Interest
- **Tuesday 23rd June 2026:** Application Deadline
- **Mid-August 2026:** Applications assessed.
- **Late-August 2026:** Notification of application outcome and grant award letters issued.
NB: Project spend should not be incurred before this. Please therefore do not plan for project spend before the start of September 2026.
- **Sunday 21st February 2027:** Final date for project claims submission.

4. Grant Specifications

4.1 Grant size - £5,000 to £50,000.

4.2 Intervention rate:

Applicants may request up to 90% of total eligible project costs, with a minimum of 10% match funding. However any final grant award may be lower than requested, depending on the availability of funds and the assessment of the application. In such cases, applicants will be expected to secure the additional match funding from their own or other sources.

Match funding should:

- Account for at least 10% of total eligible project costs.
- Be in 'cash', not 'in-kind'.
- Be in place at time of application.

4.3 Grant Payments

- **Community/third sector organisations:** grant will be paid in a 50% upfront payment with two payments of approximately 25% in arrears. The final 25% will be paid when all satisfactory cost evidence is provided.
- **Businesses:** grant will be paid in arrears, with the final 25% paid when all satisfactory cost evidence is provided.

In both cases, payment of the final 25% is further dependent upon a successful monitoring visit by a LAG representative where physical items have been procured and fulfilment of all reporting requirements. This is likely to occur between January and March 2027.

5. Assessment

Applications will first undergo a technical check by ARIA Fund staff to assess eligibility, alignment with fund priorities, cost accuracy, submission of supporting documents, and other criteria. Applications that pass these checks and best meet the fund's objectives will then be forwarded to the LAG for full assessment and decision on funding.

6. Eligibility

Eligible Area

The eligible area is rural Ayrshire and islands (Arran and Cumbrae) as defined by the [ARIA Eligibility Map](#)

Please enter your project's postcode into the search box at the top right-hand side of the map to check if it falls within the eligible area. Please note, an organisation does not need to be registered in the Ayrshire eligible area if the project itself is being delivered within it.

Fund Priorities

Projects must align with at least one ARIA Fund priority and one Scottish Government priority for 2026/2027. Applicants should identify a **maximum of two** of the most relevant priorities from each category on the application form. Selecting more than two from either category may result in your application being penalised.

ARIA Priority		Objective
Community Wealth Building (CWB)		Community Wealth Building (CWB) is about retaining wealth, jobs, and enterprises in the local area to build more sustainable and resilient rural and island economies. ARIA aims to support communities, organisations, and enterprises to embed CWB principles in their activities and apply them in practice.
Quality of Life		To support communities to maintain a good quality of life for all age groups/capabilities.
Community Led Tourism (CLT) Only available to third sector/ community organisations		To support communities to have full ownership and management of their local tourism experience, ensuring the economic benefits of tourism stay within their community.
Enterprise	Rural Enterprise including Community Enterprise	To support rural and community enterprises - particularly in key sectors such as tourism, food and drink, accommodation, and social care - to develop and grow.
	Rural Jobs	To support local people to access jobs closer to home with a higher wage bracket, created/safeguarded by rural/community enterprises.
Climate & Environment	Climate Change Mitigation	To support projects that contribute to/escalate progress towards net zero ambitions through lowering of carbon emissions.
	Just Transition	To support job transition to the green economy, with rural/community enterprise.
	Climate Change Adaptation	To support the development of the region's natural assets in ways that enhance carbon sequestration, flood attenuation, biodiversity, and local supply chain development.

Please see the **Appendix** for project types/examples associated with the ARIA priorities.

Scottish Government Priorities 2026/27
Eradicating child poverty
Growing the economy
Tackling the climate emergency
Improving public services

Eligible Organisations

- Community groups and third sector organisations with a constitution or legal incorporation. Groups without this status may still apply through a constituted or incorporated parent/sponsor organisation. In such cases, financial details (e.g. accounts and bank information) must be provided by the parent organisation.
- Businesses
- Farms (for non-agricultural activities, diversification projects only)
- Organisations of up to 49 FTE employees. Large organisations of 50 full time employees and over are ineligible.

It should be noted that micro business (up to ten full time employees) applications will be prioritised by the fund but applications from small businesses (up to forty-nine full time employees) will be considered, on a case-by-case basis.

Eligible Activity

The ARIA fund has both revenue and capital funding available in 2026/2027.

Examples of Eligible Revenue Spend

- Technical Studies or professional consultation reports to facilitate a future project, where the outcome/destination of the study is fully determined/specified.
- Training. ARIA has a focus on skills development, so training is important. Training should be specific to the ARIA Fund/listed Scottish Government priorities (section 5) and not form part of primary/secondary/tertiary education programmes.
- Event costs.
- Market research/specialist support/marketing support.
- Costs of promotional activities, e.g.: awareness raising/promotion of a service (e.g.: energy awareness/active travel/cycle hire facilities).
- Staff costs – including salary and National Insurance (NI)/pension costs for staff employed on the project described in the application. This can be existing or new staff, but recruitment timelines should be considered carefully, due to the tight timeframe of the funding window.

Please note:

- In line with **Fair Work First requirements**¹, staff should be paid at least the real Living Wage, and appropriate channels for an effective workers' voice should be evidenced in any organisation with 21 employees or more.
 - Where staff are doing less than 100% of hours on the ARIA project appropriate records, e.g timesheets must be kept and be made available for inspection by ARIA staff throughout the duration of the grant and the 12 months after the final grant payment.
 - All applications for staff costs must include evidence of salary benchmarking and a contract template. Successful applicants will also be required to provide evidence of a fair and inclusive recruitment process before funding can begin.
- Volunteer costs
 - Running costs – where **specific** to the project described and are **over and above normal running costs**. The size of the project as a proportion of mainstay work should be used to determine the proportion of running costs applied for, and this should be detailed (clearly) at application.

Examples of Eligible Capital Spend

- Community Transport Vehicles (other vehicle support will not be eligible)
- Plant/ Machinery (not including equipment for core farming activities)
- Furniture, Fixtures and Fittings
- Green Energy Equipment
- Improvement to/expansion of existing buildings/facilities
- Improving land, e.g.: landscaping works, playgrounds etc.

Capital spend will be permitted where statutory regulatory requirements e.g. planning/building warrant/listed buildings consent are already in place or are confirmed as not required at the time of application.

Statutory Regulatory Requirements

If any eligible project expenditure requires statutory or regulatory approvals (e.g. planning permission, building warrant, listed building consent, or events licence), copies of these approvals must be submitted with your application. If no approvals are required, evidence confirming this must be provided.

Ineligible Activity

- Expenditure committed prior to the ARIA grant award letter (successful applicants) - expected by start of September 2026.
- Statutory duties.

¹ Required of public sector grants from 1st July 23, <https://www.gov.scot/policies/fair-andinclusiveworkplaces/public-sector-grants-and-funding/>

- Delivery of courses which form part of primary/secondary/tertiary (eg: colleges, university) education programmes.
- Staff not directly attributable to the ARIA project delivery.
- Staffing maternity/paternity/adoption pay/statutory sick pay.
- Payments for unfunded pensions.
- Bonus or commission payments.
- Gifts and hospitality.
- Primary production of food.
- Purchase of land/buildings.
- Retention on 'capitalisation' items – part-payment withheld for assurance of quality/performance until after the project end date.
- VAT reclaimable by the applicant.
- Financial charges – bank/credit card/loan charges/foreign exchange commission/losses etc.
- Costs involved in winding up a company/organisation.

7. Supporting Documents

The following applicable supporting documentation must be supplied with your application.

Document
Constitution/governing document (if applicable)*
Incorporation document (if applicable)*
<p>Financial Information*</p> <p>Community/third sector organisations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Latest year of accounts (audited/examined if thresholds reached). • Business plan, if relevant (e.g. organisations with a trading element) <p>Businesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Latest year of accounts (audited/examined according to regulator thresholds). • Sole traders – latest year of accounts plus evidence of HMRC account with Unique Tax Reference (UTR). • Management accounts to bridge gap between date of above/present. • Business plan • Cash flow projections (covering at least one year)
<p>All applicants (Community/Third Sector organisations and Businesses)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 months' bank statements*1 (for the account the grant will be paid into and as close to the date of application as possible) Highlighting any restricted (ring fenced) funding sources. • Evidence that match funding is in place* • VAT certificate where applicable, evidence not needed where not* • 1 piece of evidence for an item costing £500 - £1,000 • 2 pieces of evidence for an item costing £1,000 - £10,000

- 3 pieces of evidence for an item costing >£10,000

Salaries

1. **Existing jobs:** payslips.
Where Real Living Wage requirement would alter salary, this must be shown clearly on Value for Money form with anticipated increase if desired.
2. **New Jobs:** benchmarking x 2 + proposed salary
3. Statement on provision of effective workers' voice e.g.: trade union for staff with evidence where applicable.

Projects with Capital Elements

1. Valid lease/title deeds, in place at least 5 years post project completion.
2. Where lease, landlord's permission to carry out works.
3. Evidence Statutory Regulatory Requirements eg: planning/building warrant/event licence in place/not needed.

Need/demand – Applicants must provide **two** supporting documents that provide objective evidence of need or demand for your project. Documents should be relevant and clearly evidence project need or strategic alignment. Examples of suitable evidence may include:

- *Results from community surveys or consultations*
- *Letters of support from independent stakeholders or beneficiaries*
- *Waiting lists or expressions of interest from potential users*
- *Usage data from similar or previous projects*
- *Strategic plans or reports identifying local gaps or priorities*
- *Feedback from public meetings or engagement sessions*

For businesses, evidence of demand may already be included in your business plan (for example, customer data, bookings, sales trends, or market research).

Local support – Applicants must provide **exactly two letters or emails** of support.

For community organisations, this may include local groups or delivery partners.
For businesses, this may include support from customers, suppliers or other local organisations.

Letters should be relevant to the project and provided by organisations or groups that are independent of the Applicant independent - i.e. written by individuals or organisations not directly involved in delivering or financially benefiting from the project. This helps demonstrate wider community backing and impartial endorsement of the proposal.

ARIA Equal Opportunities Form

This form helps us understand how the ARIA Fund is supporting inclusive rural development. Responses will not be used to assess your application but may inform how we monitor and improve reach across Ayrshire.

Other additional evidence

- **Sustainability and Future Income** - Applicants are encouraged to include information on how the project will be sustained beyond the funding period. This may include expected future income, additional grant funding, or other plans to support long-term delivery and impact. A cash flow forecast should be submitted if available, although this is not mandatory for third sector organisations.

Please note: All trading businesses must submit a business plan and supporting financial evidence, including a (one year minimum) cash flow as part of their application.

**From parent/sponsor organisation where a smaller organisation applies through this route.

Appendix

Priority	Objective	Examples (Not Limited To)
<p>Community Wealth Building (CWB)</p> <p>Community Wealth Building (CWB) is an approach to economic development that seeks to transform Scotland’s local and regional economic systems to enable local communities and people to own, have a greater stake in, access and benefit from the wealth the economy generates.</p>	<p>To support communities, organisations and enterprises to engage with CWB.*</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buying goods, services or produce locally and developing stronger local supply chains or a circular economy; • Feasibility studies for organisations who want to use / take ownership of local land or property assets for community or enterprise use; • Organisations who want to grow or develop an existing generative enterprise model (e.g. employee owned business, social / community enterprise) to enhance their social or environmental purpose.
<p>Quality of Life</p>	<p>To support communities to maintain a good quality of life for all age groups/capabilities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving physical and digital connectivity. • Fit out of community spaces. • Events/activities for people to interact. • Amenities at risk from public body cuts.
<p>Community Led Tourism (CLT)</p> <p>Only available to third sector/ community organisations</p>	<p>To support communities to have full ownership and management of their local tourism experience, ensuring the economic benefits of tourism stay within their community.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Owned accommodation facilities • Volunteer run entertainment venues. • Investment is community owned attractions

<p>Enterprise</p>	<p>Rural Enterprise including Community Enterprise</p>	<p>To support rural/community enterprises, especially in key sectors** to develop and grow.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment in amenities/attractions which will bring added community benefit/business resilience. • Development of natural assets to support rural/community enterprise. Improving access to these assets, eg: paths development/active travel promotion. • Community-led/sustainable/agri-tourism initiatives. • Training, market research, specialist advice, marketing support. • Events including ‘dabble’ events.
	<p>Rural Jobs</p>	<p>To support local people to access jobs closer to home with a higher wage bracket, created/safeguarded by rural/community enterprises.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills development/training. • Creation/retention of accessible, good quality local jobs, especially in key sectors**. • Opportunities to work locally, eg: creation of digital hubs.
	<p>Climate Change Mitigation</p>	<p>To support projects that contribute to/escalate progress towards net zero ambitions through lowering of carbon emissions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reducing energy consumption, though energy efficiency improvements/awareness raising/bikes***/e-bikes/cycle accessories***/renewables***/Electric Vehicle charging points**.* • Promoting home working/working from local digital hubs.

Climate & Environment			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promoting active travel/waste reduction. Technical/feasibility studies (with clear outcome/destination).
	Just Transition	To support job transition to the green economy, with rural/community enterprises.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Green skills training. Creation of green jobs to replace industrial/mining jobs lost.
	Climate Change Adaptation	To develop the region's natural assets which would enhance carbon sequestration/flood attenuation/biodiversity/local supply chain development****	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peatland restoration.**** Tree planting.**** Improvement of the local supply chain of eg: food & drink and development of skills therein. Volunteer costs.

* Community Wealth Building is about retaining wealth, jobs and enterprises in the local area to create more sustainable and resilient rural and island economies. ARIA aims to support communities, organisations and enterprises to apply Community Wealth Building approaches to their activities.

**Eg: Tourism, food & drink, accommodation, social care.

***Within capitalisation thresholds.

****ARIA will support principal funders eg: NatureScot, Peatland Action on this.