



The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), managed in Ireland by two regional programmes, continues to support sustainable employment opportunities, and helps to develop an environmentally friendly and resource-efficient economy. It has responded to the pandemic by awarding over €311m to the HSE to support the cost of PPE supplies to the Irish healthcare system.

Two such co-funded regional programmes in Ireland – the Southern & Eastern Regional Programme (S&E) and the Border, Midland & Western Regional Programme (BMW) – are managed respectively by the Southern Regional Assembly (SRA) and the Northern & Western Regional Assembly (NWRA).

The programmes focus on specific growth opportunities and sectors identified in Ireland’s smart specialisation strategy, to improve quality of life and to contribute to Ireland’s targets for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. The ERDF aims to strengthen economic and social cohesion in the European Union by correcting imbalances between its regions.

During the 2014-2020 period, approximately €940m was allocated to Ireland by the ERDF through the two regional programmes for the following priorities:



Ireland's two ERDF Regional Programmes awarded over €311m to the HSE to support the cost of essential PPE supplies to the Irish healthcare system, in response to the pandemic.

- Research and innovation.
- Information and communications technology.
- Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).
- The promotion of a low-carbon economy.

SMALL BUSINESSES SUPPORTS

The ERDF provides co-funding to 31 Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) around the country.

Two small business owners from Clare and Leitrim, who have benefitted greatly due to invaluable grant aid, share their success stories to date, and what the future now holds for their companies.

In 2017, Clare-based business Get the Shifts received a Business Priming Grant of €35,000 from LEO in Clare, with €14,740 of that grant claimed through the ERDF in 2019.

The idea for Get the Shifts came to Hannah Wrixon due to a pivot from an earlier business, called Last Minute Minders.

Having worked in hospitality in Australia for some years, on returning to Ireland in 2002 she found it difficult to

find high-quality childcare for her four-year-old at the time. As a result, she set up Last Minute Minders, a database of qualified, experienced and available childcare professionals for crèches, hotels and parents.

With her hospitality background, Hannah realised this concept would also work for the sector and saw a gap in the market for a service to match willing staff with needy employers at short notice.

That was the start of her new business Get the Shifts: where pre-vetted, experienced hospitality workers are notified when there is work available. For employers, it has proved a quick and easy way to expand and attract their workforce.

Hannah Wrixon has said the ERDF funding has allowed her to grow the team, invest in software, and create an inclusive platform.

“The support from the ERDF and LEOs strengthens innovation in Ireland. A lot of projects fail because they’re not properly resourced. LEOs allow entrepreneurs to have peace of mind by providing a safety net.”

HUNGRY FOR SUCCESS IN LEITRIM!

Similarly, Georgia Visnyei, who is originally from Hungary, was able to get her business off the ground with the support from LEO in Leitrim. Georgia moved to Ireland with her husband in 2004 to work as an architect. However, when the recession hit, she lost her job.

She always had a love of coffee, so decided to set up her own business and invested in a coffee roasting machine, while also participating in barista training.

Having approached LEO in Leitrim for help, she recalls that they were an amazing support. “We purchased equipment with the help of various business expansion grants from LEO, but we also got support with mentoring on aspects such as business plans and accounting.”

What started as roasting coffee beans in her kitchen soon developed into the Café Lounge in Carrick-on-Shannon, which was the shop window for their Art of Coffee production company. The Art of Coffee supplies freshly roasted coffee beans and equipment to both wholesalers and consumers.

PPE FOR HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

More recently, the two ERDF Regional Programmes in Ireland also responded to the Covid-19 pandemic by awarding over €311m to the HSE to support the cost of personal protective equipment (PPE) supplies to the Irish healthcare system.

PPE has been vital during the pandemic because it helps to stop the spread of the virus. Before Covid-19, few workers needed to wear PPE and it was relatively straightforward to acquire.

As soon as the global pandemic was declared in March 2020, there was a worldwide demand for PPE and the HSE faced the challenge of competing globally to secure and safeguard steady supplies.

The speed of this response was critical to support the provision of care required at multiple locations across the country including testing centres, assessment hubs, and acute and primary care settings.



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It was imperative that the HSE was aligned to the WHO guidelines and worked at a fast pace, engaging with the markets to source PPE in an environment that was highly volatile, complex and uncertain.

The challenges included extreme surges in demand as China, which accounts for 65% of worldwide PPE manufacturing, introduced significant restrictions.

CONTINUITY OF ACCESS AND SUPPLY

These included the closure of manufacturing plants and limitations to shipping channels due to port and airport closures. PPE pricing also rose dramatically as the WHO reported requirements for PPE to be 100 times the usual demand, with prices up to 10 times higher than normal as a result.

All global healthcare systems became price-takers within the context of PPE, and it was not always possible to negotiate downward pricing. However, the immediate security of PPE supply lines was absolutely critical to the pandemic response. Added to the sudden and dramatic price hike, was the fact that supplies could take months to deliver and market manipulation was widespread, with stocks frequently sold to the highest bidder.

In any given year, the HSE spend on PPE was between €15m and €17m. In 2020, it was nearly €1 billion. To assist with the purchasing of PPE, the two

ERDF Regional Programmes in Ireland responded by developing a Health Support Scheme, to support the HSE's efforts to secure and sustain continuity of access and supply of essential PPE.

In this regard, ERDF funding of over €311m was awarded to the HSE from the BMW Regional Programme (approx. €103m), and the Southern & Eastern Regional Programme (approx. €207m) for the supply of PPE to the health service across the two regions.

Funding from the ERDF Programmes was facilitated by the EU's Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative and the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Plus Regulations.

This helped to support operations and foster crisis response capacities in the context Covid-19; and Regulation 2020/558 on specific measures to provide exceptional flexibility for the use of the European Structural and Investment Funds in response to the Covid-19 outbreak.

FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

The ERDF Programmes are developed under an EU partnership model between the European Commission, the Irish Government, the Regional Assemblies, and an extensive consultation involving local government, the private sector, third level and research institutions, and social partners and voluntary groups.

Work is ongoing to develop the new programmes to set out how the ERDF funding allocation will be spent and implemented for the 2021-27 period.



Georgia Visnyei first started roasting coffee beans in her kitchen, and soon moved into the Café Lounge in Carrick-on-Shannon.

These well-established programmes have delivered real benefits for communities throughout Ireland since 2000. The new round of funding over the next seven years will help to support sustainable employment opportunities, combat social exclusion, promote research and development, and cultivate an environmentally friendly and resource-efficient economy.

To contact the Southern Regional Assembly (Waterford) email info@southernassembly.ie or visit www.southernassembly.ie



To contact the Northern & Western Regional Assembly email info@nwra.ie or visit www.nwra.ie

