

# Direct US and Middle East flights to Northern Ireland targeted under proposed airline funding scheme

Direct long haul flights from Northern Ireland to the US and Middle East are the target of an “unprecedented” government funding scheme designed to encourage airlines to trial long haul routes from the province.

Economy minister Gordon Lyons said officials in his department are working on developing a new Northern Ireland Route Development Scheme (NIRDS) which will provide financial support for new European, transatlantic, and Middle Eastern routes direct to Northern Ireland. The aim is to boost inbound tourism and encourage foreign direct investment.

It follows the successful rollout of the Northern Ireland Domestic Aviation Kickstart Scheme last year which managed to boost domestic connectivity with Great Britain in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic when the industry had been hit hard by successive lockdowns. Funding, which is offered to airlines, from that scheme mounted to £4.5 million but the minister didn't reveal how much the new, long haul financial support would reach.

He did, however, say he expects the “unprecedented support” from NIRDS to be available from the 2023-2024 financial year, “subject to the business case demonstrating value for money and my department securing multi-year funding appropriate approvals”.

Mr Lyons said maintaining and enhancing domestic and international air connectivity is essential to rebuilding Northern Ireland's economy.

“The new scheme aims to develop our international connectivity, in order to drive inbound tourism and Foreign Direct Investment, both of which are vital to the local economy,” he said. “It is envisaged that the NIRDS would encompass European, transatlantic and Middle Eastern routes.

“As per NIDAKS, this will be a complex and complicated process, requiring time and focus to ensure the Scheme is attractive to potential airlines. I believe the future for Northern Ireland is positive and I will continue to do what I can to ensure this.”