

BUSINESS INNOVATION GRANT GUIDANCE NOTES

This document provides guidance on the Business Innovation Growth (BIG) Programme including eligibility criteria, the application process and information required. If you are considering applying for BIG, please read this document and our [Frequently Asked Questions](#) before submitting an application.

Overview

Invest Northern Ireland (Invest NI) in partnership with Innovate NI (who operate as a Department for the Economy initiative within Invest NI) has launched a grant scheme to support Northern Ireland businesses to develop and progress their innovation activities.

The scheme will provide grant support to businesses (micro and Small or Medium sized Enterprises {SMEs}) to help them complete the essential innovation activities needed to either start an innovation journey or to progress an existing one. The innovation support delivered through BIG will also enable businesses to progress along the four stages of the Innovate NI Innovation Framework.



The level of grant support offered through BIG will be from £5,000 up to a maximum of £20,000 at a grant support rate of 70% per applicant. The amount of grant offered will be dependent on activities listed within the application form as well as Invest NI budget availability. The grant will be earned over the period as per the grant letter of offer, and payment of the grant will be dependent on eligible activities being undertaken and expenditure being made.

The call for applications will open on Thursday 14 November 2024 at 12 noon and will close on Friday 13 December 2024 at 12 noon. Invest NI reserves the right to close the application call earlier, or extend its opening, depending on the volume of applications received. Only fully completed applications submitted via the MyINI portal at the agreed closure time, or any extended closing point, will be considered. Once submitted, the online application will be assessed and scored against the scheme criteria on page 8 below. Applicants that are successful will be issued with an offer of support subject to satisfactory Know Your Customer (KYC) checks.

The number of offers made will depend on applicant demand and/or budget availability, whichever comes first. Should there be additional budget available, and further application calls open, applicants that are unsuccessful in this call will be able to apply in future calls. Applicants who are successful in this call will not be eligible to apply again.

Eligibility

BIG is aimed at start-up and established micro and SMEs based in Northern Ireland (NI) across all sectors including start-ups, pre-trading businesses, sole traders, partnerships and limited companies - with the exclusion of primary agricultural producers, who are primarily concerned with crops, animal production, forestry, logging, fisheries, or aquaculture - who have a novel idea that will lead to the development of a new or improved product, service, business model or process which will create value in your business/sector.

This scheme is aimed at businesses who are not currently Invest NI customers, have not received an offer or payment of grant support from Invest NI within the last 5 years (not including Covid-19 emergency support measures, Economic Recovery Innovation Grant, Innovation Vouchers or Access to Finance funding e.g. Techstart Proof of Concept grant) and do not owe any outstanding liabilities to Invest NI. Businesses who have applied for the Digital Transformation Flexible Fund, which is delivered by Council NI, are also eligible to apply for BIG.

If a business has previously received an offer of support under any Invest NI scheme it can still gain access to a BIG application via the online Eligibility Checker as long as no Invest NI offers or grant payments have been made to the company within the last five years, subject to all other criteria being met.

Businesses must meet **all** of the following criteria:

- The business must currently be based in NI.
- Proprietors, Partners, or Directors must be based in NI.
- The business must be an SME (fewer than 250 employees and with turnover less than or equal to €50m or balance sheet total less than or equal to €43m. Balance sheet total is the value of fixed plus current assets.)
- The business must have a HMRC Unique Taxpayer Reference (UTR), sometimes called a 'tax reference' number.
- The business must be able to clearly demonstrate how the project or idea aligns with the Innovate NI definition of innovation which is "*the development and implementation of a new or improved product, service, model or process which is novel (significantly different) and has/will be introduced to the market (product/service) or implemented within the business (process, model) creating value*".
- The business must not have received an offer or payment of grant support from Invest NI within the last five years (this does not include COVID-19 emergency funds, Economic Recovery Innovation Grant (ERIG), Innovation Vouchers or Access to Finance funding e.g. Techstart NI Proof of Concept grants).
- The business must be able to demonstrate that it is viable and will remain so for the duration of the period of Invest NI support, with evidence that the business has sufficient resources to meet any funding gaps.
- The proposed business activity must be a strategic fit with the [Invest NI 2024-27 Business Strategy](#) and be aligned to the [Department for the Economy Minister's new Economic Vision](#).
- The Business must accept the completion of Invest NI Customer Due Diligence checks on the business, including a credit check.

If you are a business that is part of a group structure with the same ultimate ownership, you may only submit one application across the group.

Exclusions

The following are **not eligible** to apply:

- Businesses already in receipt of, or intending to gain, other government support for the proposed innovation activities in the Business Innovation Grant application.
- Businesses that have an outstanding liability to Invest NI brought about through grant clawback proceedings. If a satisfactory repayment plan is in place, the business may submit an application for consideration.
- Businesses, or where any member of Senior Management within the business, subject to a current bankruptcy order, Individual Voluntary Arrangement, Company Voluntary Arrangement (CVA), County Court Judgement, or Company Director Disqualification.
- Businesses that have any of the following as their main business activity:
- Agricultural Production; Forestry, Logging; Fisheries and Aquaculture Sectors (Production and Processing);
 - “primary production of fishery and aquaculture products” means all operations relating to the fishing, rearing or cultivation of aquatic organisms, as well as on-farm or on-board activities necessary for preparing an animal or plant for the first sale, including cutting, filleting or freezing, and the first sale to resellers or processors.”
 - “processing and marketing of fishery and aquaculture products” means all operations, including handling, treatment and transformation, performed following the time of landing(or harvesting in case of aquaculture) that result in a processed product, as well as distribution thereof.
- Applications which include or relate to activities that Invest NI considers ineligible or involving an unacceptable reputational risk, such as gambling, tobacco products and drug-based products which are not authorised as medicines.

Eligible Activities

The aim of this programme is to incentivise Northern Ireland based SMEs to develop and progress innovation activities.

Eligible business development activities are costs that are incurred through the engagement of third party, arm’s length providers with relevant experience in delivering similar activities, where an invoice is raised for services provided. Payment of grant money is not up front and will be dependent on the delivery of specific activities as outlined in any offer of support.

There is a cap of £700 per day for consultancy costs.

Examples of eligible costs include, but are not wholly limited to:

ACTIVITY	ELIGIBLE COSTS
In Market Research (problem/opportunity validation)	Consultancy costs
In Market Research (product/service idea validation)	Travel & accommodation costs if outside NI (for maximum of 2 company representatives)
ISO 56000 series Innovation Management Audit including report production	Consultancy costs
Product/Service market Validation and Testing	Consultancy costs Travel & accommodation costs if outside NI (for maximum of 2 company representatives)

Minimal Viable Product (MVP) development with industry, including market testing.	Industry sub-contracting costs
Process design and validation	Consultancy costs Travel & accommodation costs if outside NI (for maximum of 2 company representatives)
Market entry planning including analysis of costs for full product/service development & distribution/implementation	Consultancy costs
Design of market entry strategy	Consultancy costs
Identification and establishing of manufacturing and supply chains outside Northern Ireland	Travel & accommodation costs outside NI (for maximum of 2 company representatives)
New Market Development Visits outside NI	Travel & accommodation costs outside NI (for maximum of 2 company representatives)
Attendance at Trade Fairs & Exhibitions outside NI	Travel & accommodation costs outside NI (for maximum of 2 company representatives)
Product Launches/Demonstrations	Stand rental costs Stand assembly costs (e.g. exhibition stand contractor's fees) Stand operating costs (e.g. insurance, electricity, interpreter) Exhibition speaking slots, VIP passes, pitch opportunities (for maximum of 2 company reps) Travel & accommodation costs if outside NI (for maximum of 2 company representatives)

Further detail on the [eligibility of costs relating to travel and accommodation can be found here](#).

The following costs are **not** eligible:

- Related party consultancy costs (including, but not limited to, consultancy provided by family members and current/former employees)
- Project costs incurred prior to the issue date of a BIG grant offer of support
- Capital purchases e.g., machinery, IT equipment
- Items defined as being a cost of sale e.g. raw materials
- Items already part of a business's outgoings or overheads e.g. rent, standard accountancy services
- Recruitment costs
- Online marketing costs where expenditure is incurred directly with the online platform e.g., Facebook, Google and LinkedIn. Costs incurred via a third party such as a digital agency are eligible for inclusion.
- Innovation Voucher Programme approved suppliers – [Innovation Vouchers Knowledge Providers | Invest Northern Ireland \(investni.com\)](#)
- Standard mobile apps for the purposes of promoting the business, and sales and marketing functions
- General sales activities
- Standard business advice
- General marketing activities
- Business plans and economic appraisals

- Website development and online optimisation for the purposes of promoting the business, and sales and marketing functions
- Internships for students from knowledge institutions
- Software purchases and basic software development
- Aid that would promote or subsidise the cost of exports
- Testing products that are not within the ownership of your business.

The above lists are not exhaustive, and Invest NI has the discretion to omit costs if deemed ineligible or not within the scope of the programme.

The support will focus on activities that take place within a defined time period, with all activities to be completed and grant claimed within the timescales detailed within the offer of support.

Procurement

Invest NI recommends that you seek a minimum of two quotes from suppliers to ensure that you are getting good value for money. You must retain any quotes received as these may be required as evidence in the claims process and any future audit.

You should issue a written specification of the goods or service to be procured to potential suppliers. The specification must include all the information needed for the eligible goods or service to be procured to complete the project and must be sufficiently detailed to allow for a fair comparison of costs on a like to like basis. The same specification should be sent to all suppliers asked to quote.

In order to demonstrate value for money, it is expected that applicants use the most economically advantageous quotation of each item to demonstrate best value on the market for the project item. If your preferred supplier is not the cheapest, please explain why. We may not be able to accept the cost of your preferred supplier, and this may reduce the grant for the good/service to the cheapest quote.

The following guidelines must be complied with:

- The quotes you provide should be from businesses or individuals who are independent from your business and you.
- The quotes should clearly identify the supplier. (Purchasing goods or services from associated companies will not be permitted).
- Quotes must be addressed to the company making the application.
- Quotes must be sought from suppliers who can realistically supply the goods or service.
- Quotes should include a detailed and itemised breakdown of costs to allow Invest NI to determine the eligibility of costs.
- Quotes should be in pounds sterling, or, if another currency, be supplemented with a screenshot of the exchange rate from XE.com showing the date of the conversion.
- Where there is limited competition in the market for the goods or service you are procuring resulting in you being unable to request the minimum number of quotes required, then this should be documented, and an explanation provided.
- Quotes should be 'like-for-like', particularly where goods or service are specific. All quotations must meet the specification you provide and demonstrate 'like for like' comparison to verify value for money.
- Email quotes are acceptable and the covering email from suppliers must be provided.
- Quotes must be dated within 3 months of the date the application is submitted and must contain the supplier's full details such as name and contact details.

- If VAT is applicable to the items quoted, this should be clearly noted on the quotations to establish total project costs.
- If the lowest quotation has not been accepted because of quality considerations the applicant must provide a clear rationale for this.

Please be aware, the grant amount will be based on the original price within the application. Any increase in eligible costs will not be covered but may have an impact on your project payback and eligibility.

For successful applicants, documentation such as quotes needs to be retained until the applicant ceases to be under any obligation to Invest NI under the provisions of a BIG grant offer.

Invest NI reserves the right to reduce or disallow costs, which in Invest NI's view, do not appear to offer good value for money or are outside the typical market rates for comparable services.

Timescales

BIG is a competitive call for applications. The call for applications will open on Thursday 14 November 2024 12 noon and will **close on Friday 13 December 2024 12 noon**. The call may be closed early or extended depending on the volume of applications received. Applications must be submitted prior to the call closing.

As this is a competitive call, please take note of the assessment process detailed in this document and ensure you read and check your application form before submitting. Corrections or additional information offered after the application call closes will not be accepted. All information must be included within the application form and please note that appended business plans, spreadsheets etc. (with the exception of accounts/management accounts and financial projections) will not be considered part of the application.

How to Apply

The first step is to check that you are eligible to apply for BIG by using the eligibility checker, which will be available from Thursday 14 November 2024 12 noon at innovatени.com/businessinnovationgrant

If you meet the eligibility criteria, you will be issued with a link to an online application form via the Invest NI Customer Portal; this is our official online application and administration system. You can save your application and return to it at any time.

In addition to completing the online application form you will also need to provide a digital copy of your most recent annual accounts (to include a Profit & Loss Account and Balance Sheet), together with any recently available management accounts. If your business has not yet compiled annual accounts, you can submit your most up to date management accounts.

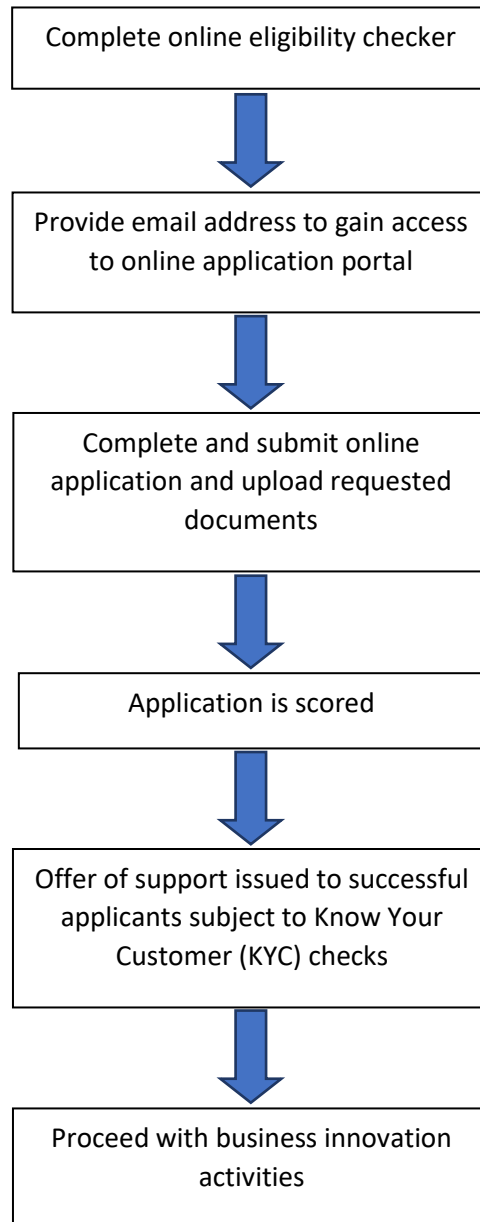
Please note the maximum size of each item that can be submitted digitally is 20MB.

If you meet the eligibility criteria, you will need the following information to complete the application form:

- Information on your business background.
- Proposed project description, including the purpose and benefits of your proposed project(s).

- Information on project costs, including itemised expenditure.
- Supplier quotation(s) for all the project costs included in the application form.
- Information on how you plan to fund the project.

You should ensure you have all relevant information at hand before starting the application. You can save a draft of your application and return to update it at any time prior to submitting before the application call closure; regular saving of the application is recommended. You will need to click on the 'Submit' button when you have completed the application. The application has been designed to be completed by the owner/operator of the business.



Assessing Your Application

Applications will be assessed by an assessment panel that will primarily consist of Innovate NI and Invest NI client executives/managers. All applications received will be scored in line with the assessment criteria detailed below. It is important you consider the assessment criteria and ensure your application clearly articulates how you plan to deliver the new business innovation activities.

The innovation is assessed against the Innovate NI assessment criteria which is on their website (www.innovateni.com) and is measured against the definition of innovation as “the development and implementation of a new or improved product, service, model, or process which is novel (significantly different), and has/will be introduced to the market (product/service) or implemented within the business (process, model) creating value”.

The table below highlights the scoring criteria for the innovative project.

Assessment Criteria	Score
Innovation	
The innovation is a new or improved product, process, service, model, that will be or has been developed.	Pass/Fail
Novelty	
The innovation is novel (significantly different) from what is currently in the business.	
and/or	
The innovation is novel (significantly different) from what is currently available in the market.	
SCORE	Up to 5
Value	
The submission clearly demonstrates how the innovation will create value within the business.	
and/or	
The submission clearly demonstrates how the innovation will create value within the Northern Ireland Economy.	
SCORE	Up to 5
Sustainability	
The submission clearly demonstrates if the innovation will deliver any elements of sustainability and/or positive environmental impacts	
SCORE	Up to 5
To be eligible for the grant you must pass the innovation question. Scoring will be used to rank applications on a competitive basis.	

Businesses that demonstrate how the project or idea meets the definition will also receive recognition from Innovate NI in the form of a bronze, silver or gold certificate from the Department of the Economy.

The applications will also be assessed for viability, risk, ability to fund the project and strategic fit, in line with the Invest NI intervention principles. These will be assessed on a pass or fail basis **with all questions requiring a pass to receive a grant offer.**

The following intervention/assessment principles will be assessed.

Intervention / assessment principle	
Strategic Fit - is the project a strategic fit with the Invest NI 2024-2027 Business Plan?	Pass/Fail
Project Risk - What are the project risks and have they been mitigated?	Pass/Fail
Viability - Is the business viable? Attach accounts and forecasts.	Pass/Fail
Additionality - Why does the business need the support?	Pass/Fail
Affordability – Can the company afford to fund the project? Attach evidence such as financial accounts, bank statement or letter from your accountant.	Pass/Fail

The application must pass both the innovation assessment and the intervention principles to be considered for an offer of support.

To be considered for funding, your application must also achieve a pass in the Invest NI KYC process.

This KYC process will review the following:

- Photographic ID and identity documentation
- Credit check on the applicant/named company individuals and the company itself
- Information provided in your application form is aligned to publicly held information and is in no way misleading
- Your business and any member of senior management within the business are not subject to a current bankruptcy order, Individual Voluntary Arrangement, Company Voluntary Arrangement (CVA), County Court Judgement, or Company Director Disqualification
- You are not currently involved in a CVA either through the applicant company or a linked company.

We will complete a credit check, searches on Companies House, web searches and any other due diligence as required in order to satisfy our KYC process.

If any misleading information or elevated risk factors are found in your application, it may be escalated to an Invest NI director for review and decision on whether to proceed with your application.

Application Detail

To be considered for funding, your application must achieve a pass based on the scoring model detailed above and will further be ranked in line with a competitive model with the highest ranking projects being awarded first. Any application that does not meet this threshold will be deemed ineligible for funding.

The application process is open to all [eligible businesses](#).

Following scoring, applications will be awarded based on date of application submitted. The call will remain open for 4 weeks or until the funding has been allocated (whichever should come sooner).

Should a business be unsuccessful with an application to this call, it can submit an application to future Business Innovation Growth calls as and when they open.

Notification of Funding Decision

Following submission of your application you will be informed of your outcome by January 2025.

If you hope to secure Invest NI funding for your proposed business innovation activities, it is vital that you do not commence the project activities or incur any costs until you receive an offer of support from Invest NI. **If you incur costs because you have signed contracts, given permission to start work, raised invoices or made payments before you have received an Invest NI Letter of Offer, these costs cannot be claimed for and could prevent you from accessing any of the grant funding awarded.** Any argument that Invest NI support is required to proceed will be placed in question and will likely impact the scoring of the application.

On completion of KYC checks, successful applicants will be informed and a Letter of Offer will be issued.

A full outline of conditions will be provided to the successful businesses in an Invest NI Letter of Offer. This must be signed and returned by the applicant for the support to be available.

Unsuccessful applicants will be informed via email.

Appeals Procedure

Applications will be assessed by an assessment panel that will primarily consist of Innovate NI and Invest NI client executives/managers. All applications received will be scored in line with the assessment criteria detailed above.

Applications that meet or exceed the minimum threshold, subject to budget availability and successful Know Your Customer (KYC) checks, will then be offered financial support towards their proposed business innovation activities.

In the first instance, if an applicant is unhappy with the outcome of their application, they can seek feedback on their application and areas where it did not score highly, relevant to other applications. It is hoped this feedback will be taken on board and used to strengthen any future application made to any future Business Innovation Growth calls that may be opened.

Should an applicant still be unhappy with the outcome, they can request a review of the scoring of their application. This review will be deemed to be an appeal made under Stage 1 of Invest NI's Appeals Procedure, a copy of which is available on request.

Any appeal must be submitted within **30 working days** of receipt of notification of the original decision to bigappeals@investni.com.

Your Responsibilities

You are responsible for providing accurate and true information in your application.

The provision of wrong or misleading information is an offence and any such information may be used in any subsequent criminal investigation. The information provided in this application form may be made available to other departments or agencies for the purposes of preventing or detecting crime.

Support is conditional on the business progressing in line with the business innovation activities that are outlined in the application.

In return for Invest NI funding we will expect:

- You to work in partnership with us to grow your business and the Northern Ireland economy
- Business innovation activities to be carried out within agreed timescales
- Financial transparency
- Progress reports as and when reasonably requested
- A commitment to be an environmentally and socially responsible business.

Submitting a claim

Payment of grant money is not up-front and will be dependent on the delivery of specific activities as outlined in any offer of support. Documentary evidence will be required to demonstrate that the specific activities against which grant money is being claimed have been carried out and paid for.

Once your project is complete you must submit your grant claim to Invest NI via the [Invest NI Claim Pack](#) by the date detailed within your Letter of Offer. You also need to complete the BIG monitoring form which can be accessed via your Letter of Offer. The form can also be accessed here – [Business Innovation Grant – Monitoring Pro-Forma \(DOC\)](#) so that you know what information you will have to maintain and provide in order to claim your grant payment.

Proof of Invest NI receiving this claim must be retained by the applicant.

Please note that all costs must be incurred and paid for by the business that is named on the Letter of Offer.

Data Protection and Handling

BIG is managed and administered by Invest NI/Innovate NI who will have access to the information you provide as part of your application; both as a means to assess your eligibility and to conduct any post scheme governance assessments.

As this financial support is sourced from public funds Invest NI will, in the interest of openness and transparency, proactively publish limited information on the funding including:

- name of applicant
- application title
- amount of assistance

Invest NI/Innovate NI will handle your data in compliance with applicable laws including the General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018. For further details on our data handling practices please see the [Invest NI Privacy Notice](#).

Automated Decision Making

Automated decisions, based on responses to the online eligibility checker, will be carried out to assess the eligibility of an applicant to be issued with an application form. We request that you ensure you select your responses to the eligibility checker carefully and accurately.

Applicants have the option to access a human review of an automated decision if they feel an automated decision has been wrongly made based on the information provided. To request a review on this basis please complete this [enquiry form](#) and a member of Invest NI's Business Support Team will contact you. The Business Support Team can also be contacted by telephone on 0800 181 4422.

Subsidy Control / State Aid

Invest NI financial assistance is awarded to businesses that trade, or have the potential to trade, outside Northern Ireland and is granted as either a UK Subsidy or an EU State aid (including *de minimis* aid).

UK Government guidance on the March 2023 Windsor Agreement confirms that Article 10(1) of the Windsor Agreement will normally apply to subsidies granted to goods trading beneficiaries located in NI and this constitutes State aid.

"Goods-trading" beneficiary means a recipient of Invest NI financial assistance which markets goods that are tradeable with the EU. Businesses that are a combination of services and goods are also captured by Article 10(1) of the Windsor Framework and are subject to EU State aid rules. Wholly service-based businesses are subject to UK Subsidy control.

BIG support awarded to goods trading companies will be treated as *de minimis* aid under Commission Regulation (EU) 2023/2831. Support awarded to wholly service companies will be treated as a Subsidy under the UK Subsidy Control Act 2023.

General Enquiries

If you have any enquiries about the BIG contact us at big@investni.com.

If you have any enquiries about support available to your business, outside of the BIG programme, please complete this [enquiry form](#) and a member of Invest NI's Business Support Team will contact you. The Business Support Team can also be contacted by telephone on 0800 181 4422.