

AMBITION TO GROW

JANUARY 2025

GUIDANCE NOTES

This document provides guidance on Invest Northern Ireland's (Invest NI) [Ambition to Grow](#) programme including eligibility criteria, application process and information required.

If you are considering applying for Ambition to Grow, please read this document along with our [FAQs](#) carefully before applying.

OVERVIEW

Ambition to Grow is an Invest NI support programme designed to help businesses generate sales from customers outside Northern Ireland and with this increase their employment levels. It is primarily aimed at businesses that are not currently accessing Invest NI support.

Under Ambition to Grow, eligible businesses can receive grant support to help create new employment as well as assisting them with the costs of targeting customers outside Northern Ireland, technical development activities, and upskilling existing and new employees. The maximum level of grant support offered through Ambition to Grow is £45,000 per applicant with the amount of grant offered dependent on activities listed within the application form as well as Invest NI budget availability. Grant payment will be dependent on key activities being undertaken and costs being incurred over a two-year period.

It is hoped that Ambition to Grow will attract a spread of applications from throughout all areas of Northern Ireland. The programme is managed and administered by Invest NI.

The call for applications will open on **Monday 6 January 2025, 9:00** and will close on **Friday 24 January 2025, 12:00 noon**. Invest NI reserves the right to close the application call earlier, or extend its opening, depending on the volume of applications received. Only applications submitted via the MyINI portal at the agreed closure time, or any extended closing point will be considered.

Please note this is a two-stage application process. The first stage is the completion of an online application, which will be assessed and scored against the programme criteria. The second stage will involve the top-ranking applications from stage one being invited for a face-to-face meeting to validate the information provided in the application form and this meeting will be scored on a pass or fail basis.

Applicants that are successful in the second stage will be issued with an offer of support subject to satisfactory Know Your Customer (KYC) checks.

The number of offers made will depend on budget availability, with offers being made to the top-ranking applicants that pass the validation meeting and working down the list until available funding is committed. Should an applicant decline an offer, it may be offered to the

next ranked application.

ELIGIBILITY

Invest NI seeks to support manufacturing or tradeable services businesses that have:

- the potential to achieve at least 25% of sales external to Northern Ireland (or at least £250,000 external sales, whichever is lower); and
- the potential to employ at least 10 staff, within five years.

Ambition to Grow provides businesses with a steppingstone to achieving these levels of external sales and employment and although not a required output of this programme, each Ambition to Grow application must demonstrate there is the potential to achieve these levels in the longer term.

Ambition to Grow is aimed at micro, small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) based in Northern Ireland that have annual turnover under £1m or sales to customers outside Northern Ireland of less than £300k per year. Businesses must have commenced trading to be able to apply and businesses that participate in innovative activities, paying higher salaries for new positions as well as those adding value to a product are also likely to score highly relative to those that are not.

Ambition to Grow is primarily aimed at businesses that are not currently Invest NI customers and that have not received an offer or payment of grant support from Invest NI within the last five years. Payments made under Covid-19 emergency support measures, Economic Recovery Innovation Grant, Innovation Vouchers or Access to Finance funding do not impact a business's eligibility to apply. Businesses that have received other Invest NI support but meet all other eligibility criteria may be able to apply for Ambition to Grow and should contact their Invest NI Client Executive to discuss if an application can be accessed.

Businesses must meet all the following criteria:

- The business must currently be based in Northern Ireland, with at least one director/partner/proprietor residing in Northern Ireland.
- The business must intend to create new employment over the next one to two years. If fewer than three new full time equivalent positions paying at least the Real Living Wage (currently £12.60 per hour) are proposed, at least one of the new roles must be a full-time management position (minimum of 30 hours per week) contributing to growth of the business outside Northern Ireland and paying a salary of at least £30,000.
- The business must intend to grow sales from customers outside Northern Ireland.
- 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 €42m).
- The business must provide a value-added commercial product and/or service.
- The business must have commenced trading and currently have annual turnover less than £1m or annual sales to customers outside Northern Ireland of less than £300k.

- 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, Innovation Vouchers or Access to Finance funding) or must meet all other criteria and have the agreement of its Invest NI Client Executive to access an application form.
- 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 Business Strategy 2024-2027](#).
- The business must accept the completion of Invest NI Customer Due Diligence checks on the business, including director credit checks.

If your business is part of a group structure with the same ultimate ownership, you may only submit one application across the group. Businesses in common ownership with existing Invest NI Clients should contact their Invest NI Client Executive to discuss if an application can be submitted to Ambition to Grow.

EXCLUSIONS

The following are not eligible to apply:

- Businesses that have not yet commenced trading.
- Businesses already in receipt of or intending to gain other government support for the proposed new employment and/or growth activities.
- Businesses that have any of the following as their main business activity: agricultural production; fisheries and aquaculture sectors (production and processing); steel; coal; shipbuilding; synthetic fibres; transport and its infrastructure; tourism accommodation; visitor attractions; healthcare services (in-person); energy (generation, distribution, and its infrastructure); wholesale; retail (including on-line); distribution.
- Businesses that have an outstanding liability to Invest NI brought about through grant claw back proceedings. If a satisfactory repayment plan is in place, the business may apply for consideration.
- Businesses or where any member of senior management within the business are subject to a current bankruptcy order, Individual Voluntary Arrangement (IVA), Company Voluntary Arrangement (CVA), County Court Judgement (CCJ), or Company Director Disqualification.
- Applications which include or relate to activities that Invest NI considers as ineligible or as 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 grow into

markets outside Northern Ireland and to increase their employment levels here through the creation of well-paid jobs.

For an application to be considered eligible it must outline the creation of new employment over the next one to two years. For applications that are proposing fewer than three new permanent full-time equivalent created above current levels and paying at least the Real Living Wage, at least one of the new roles must be a full-time management position within the business, have minimum basic gross annual salary of £30,000 and contribute towards the growth of the business into markets outside Northern Ireland. Applications proposing three or more new full time equivalent positions paying above the Real Living Wage do not have to include management positions but can include these within the proposed new employment.

Full time equivalent positions can be a combination of full-time roles (contracted for 30+ hours per week and equivalent to 1.0 full time equivalent) or part time roles (contracted for 16-30 hours per week and equivalent to 0.5 full time equivalent).

Support may be provided towards other activities that positively impact the growth of the business into new markets, the efficiency and competitiveness of the business, the strategic direction of the business, the skills base of the business or activities that result in the development of new products and services.

A maximum of £45,000 is available for each successful applicant as follows:

- up to £30,000 towards new employment within the business. Either £5,000 per new job created towards a minimum of three full time equivalent positions, or up to £15,000 towards each new eligible management position (maximum of two) at a support rate of up to 40% of 12 months' salary cost.
- £10,000 towards business development activities, where the amount of support provided shall be no more than 50% of the cost of eligible activities as detailed below.
- £5,000 on the completion of an Export Health Check, Export Marketing Plan, and Innovate NI Self-Assessment.

State Aid limits apply which may limit the level of support provided in some circumstances, depending on the level of salaries being proposed for new employment. The total value of grant offered will be no more than 30% of two times the total annual salaries of new proposed employment.

Payment of grant money is not up-front and is dependent on the delivery of specific activities as outlined in an offer of support e.g., creation and verification of new employment. Documentary evidence will be required to demonstrate that the specific activities against which grant money is being claimed have been conducted and paid for.

New employment must be the creation of permanent Northern Ireland based positions directly within the business.

Eligible business development activities are costs that are incurred through the engagement of third party, arm's length providers where an invoice is raised for services provided.

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

Fairs & Exhibitions outside Northern Ireland – attendance or participation

- Travel and Accommodation for two company representatives.
- Stand rental costs.
- Stand assembly costs (e.g., exhibition stand contractor's fees).
- Stand operating costs (e.g., insurance, electricity, interpreter).
- Equipment transportation costs.
- Exhibition speaking slots, VIP passes and pitch opportunities.

Marketing

- Specialist expertise not part of the client's normal expenditure for web site design and promotional video and animation design for use on the Client's website
- Advertising outside Northern Ireland including design, production and placement costs but excluding the purchase of mailing or membership lists and pay per click and display advertising costs for online advertising platforms including but not limited to Google, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram

Product Launches/Seminars Open Days/Special Event Days

- Costs for publicity and promotional materials (excluding printing costs)

Product & Business Development Consultancy Fees and Expenses

- Specialist expertise not part of the client's normal expenditure
- Packaging design
- Product protection registration and legal costs
- Costs for preparation for quality standards audit only, excluding quality standard audit costs

Training

- Non-mandatory training or qualification costs for employees agreed in advance with Invest NI

The following costs are not eligible:

- 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.
- Expenditure related to growing sales of the business in Northern Ireland.
- 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.
- Costs incurred prior to the issue of an offer of support. Employees recruited prior to the issue of an offer of support will not be eligible for grant payment.

The above lists are not exhaustive and proposed expenditure included in an application will be deemed eligible/non-eligible as appropriate.

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

TIMESCALES

Ambition to Grow is a competitive call for applications. The call for applications will open on **Monday 6 January 2025, 9:00** and close on **Friday 24 January 2025, 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. (except for 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 Ambition to Grow by using the eligibility checker, which will be available from **Monday 6 January 2025, 9:00** at investni.com/ambitiontogrow.

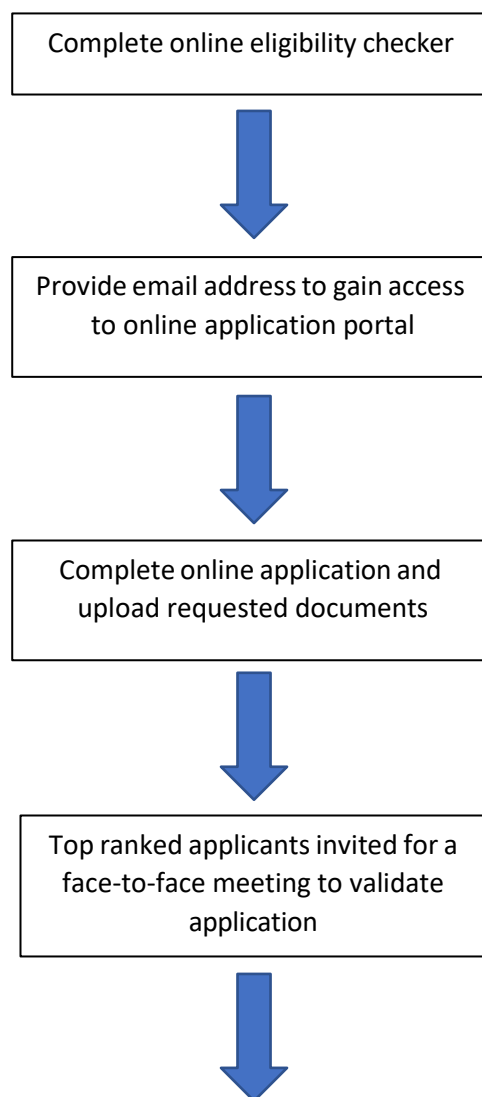
If you meet the eligibility criteria, you will be issued with a link to an online application form via our online portal. If you have received Invest NI offers or payments of grant support within the last five years, but meet all other criteria, you can discuss with your Client Executive if an application can be accessed.

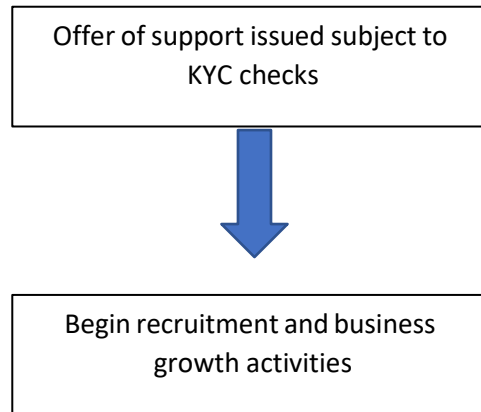
In addition to completing the online application form you will also need to provide a digital copy of your most recent annual accounts (to include a Profit & Loss Account and Balance Sheet), together with any recently available management accounts. If your business has not yet compiled annual accounts,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

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. If the applicant gets through to the second stage, the project meeting will be conducted with company management, who must be a director/partner/proprietor.





ASSESSING YOUR APPLICATION

Applications will be assessed by an assessment panel that will primarily consist of Invest NI Client Executives/Managers from the Regional Office covering the application area. All applications received will be scored in line with the Assessment Criteria detailed below, with the top-ranking applications in each region that meet or exceed the minimum threshold being invited for a validation meeting, subject to budget availability.

On successful completion of the validation meeting, and subject to successful KYC checks, applicants will then be offered financial support towards their proposed new employment and business growth activities. Should an applicant not be successful in the validation meeting stage, the next highest scoring applicant in that region may be invited for a validation meeting.

An Invest NI Assessment Panel will assess applications using the following criteria:

Assessment Criteria	Maximum Score
<p>1. Strategic Fit - How well does the proposed new employment and growth activities fit with the Invest NI and Northern Ireland Government strategy for economic development? What level of value-added activities are taking place? What emphasis is there on growing sales outside Northern Ireland?</p> <p>Please see our Business Strategy 2024 - 2027.</p>	20
<p>2. Impact - How much of a difference will Invest NI support make to the speed, scope and/or scale of the projected growth? Would some or all the activity happen anyway, regardless of getting grant support?</p>	30

3. Risk and Viability - What level of risk is attached to Invest NI providing a grant to the business, what is the likelihood of success, how financially viable is the business and what is the likelihood it will be financially viable in the future?	20
4. Economic Return - Is the proposal economically efficient? By how much do the benefits of the proposed activity for the business and Invest NI exceed the costs? What level of new sales outside Northern Ireland are being projected? What salary levels are proposed for new employment?	20
5. Sales Displacement - Will the proposed activities displace the sales of other businesses in Northern Ireland or wider United Kingdom?	5
6. Labour Displacement - What impact will your proposed activities have on the labour market in Northern Ireland or wider United Kingdom?	5

It is important you consider the assessment criteria and ensure your application clearly articulates how you plan to deliver the new employment and business growth activities and include relevant achievable outcomes and outputs to achieve the highest possible score.

KNOW YOUR CUSTOMER

It is important that in the administration of public funds that Invest NI is diligent in its checks and knows sufficient details about its customer before proceeding with offering financial support.

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

This KYC process will review the following:

- Photographic ID & 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, 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 score of at least 40% in each section. Any application that does not meet this threshold will be deemed ineligible for funding.

Following the assessment process, eligible applications will be ranked in order of the highest to lowest score.

The top-ranking applicants will be invited for a face-to-face meeting to validate the information provided within their application. This meeting will be with the business owner/operator and not with consultants or accountants associated with the business.

Funding will be awarded to applicants that pass the second stage in order of ranking until the available funding budget is fully allocated. Please note that, even if an application is deemed eligible this is not a guarantee of funding as all funding could be allocated before reaching lower ranked applications.

Should a business be unsuccessful with an application to this call, it can apply to future Ambition to Grow calls as and when they open.

NOTIFICATION OF FUNDING DECISION

Following closure of the application call at the proposed closing time **on Friday 24 January 2024, 12 noon** the received applications will be assessed, with the top scoring applicants invited for a meeting when the scoring process is complete.

If you hope to secure Invest NI funding for your proposed new employment and business growth activities, it is vital that you do not commence recruitment 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 impact the scoring of the application.

Following the second stage, and on completion of KYC checks, successful applicants will be informed, and a Letter of Offer will be issued.

Unsuccessful applicants will be informed via email.

APPEALS PROCEDURE

Applications will be assessed by an assessment panel that will primarily consist of Invest NI Client Executives/Managers from the Regional Office covering the application area. All applications received will be scored in line with the Assessment Criteria detailed above, with the top ranked applications in each region that meet or exceed the minimum threshold being invited for a validation meeting which will be scored on a pass/fail basis. On successful completion of the meeting, and subject to budget availability, they will then be offered financial support towards the proposed employment and growth 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 Ambition to Grow 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 atgappeals@investni.com

YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES

You are responsible for providing accurate and true information on 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 on 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 what is outlined in the application and the business securing new employees, with the requirement that assisted employment is maintained for a minimum of three years. Should new employees be taken on, grant be drawn down and then employment levels decrease within three years from payment of the relevant grant, repayment of grant money (in full or in part) may be sought.

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.
- Quality jobs to be created in your company within agreed timescales.
- An increase in the sales of your product or service outside Northern Ireland
- Financial transparency
- Progress reports as and when reasonably requested.

- A commitment to be an environmentally and socially responsible business.

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

DATA PROTECTION AND HANDLING

Ambition to Grow is managed and administered by Invest NI who will have access to the information you provide as part of your application; both 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 will manage 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 conducted 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

Ambition to Grow is Selective Financial Assistance. As such it operates in accordance with the Subsidy Control Principles of the UK-EU Trade & Cooperation Agreement including, where appropriate Commission Regulation (EU) No 651/2014 – the General Block Exemption Regulation.

GENERAL ENQUIRIES

If you have any enquiries about support available to your business, outside of the Ambition to Grow 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.