



Frequently Asked Questions

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Q1 How does an Innovation Voucher work?

An Innovation Voucher is worth up to £5,000 (or euro equivalent) and allows small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) or early stage entrepreneurs to access academic skills and expertise from one of the registered Knowledge Providers throughout Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The aim is to improve the innovation capability of your business and to build links with public sector Knowledge Providers, such as the universities, colleges, technology institutions or research organisations. If you would like help with an innovation project, such as developing innovative products, processes or services; scientific research; identification of new materials or exploring new technologies, you may apply for an Innovation Voucher to access specialist expertise, technology or facilities that might not otherwise be available to you.

Medium sized businesses (with more than 50 employees) are not eligible for an Innovation Voucher if they have received assistance from Invest NI's Grant for R&D programme in the last five years.

If you are awarded a Voucher, you have nine months from the date of issue to complete your project with the Knowledge Provider. On completion of your project, you will receive a final report from the Knowledge Provider and will pay VAT of 20% direct to the Knowledge Provider. Invest NI will pay the Knowledge Provider direct up to a maximum of £5,000 (or euro equivalent).

Innovation Vouchers are not transferrable and must be used for the project detailed in the approved application form.

Q2 Who are the Knowledge Providers?

Knowledge Providers are public sector bodies including universities, colleges, institutes of technology and research organisations throughout Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. View the list of Knowledge Providers here.

<https://www.investni.com/innovation-vouchers-knowledge-providers>

You can only use an Innovation Voucher with one of the approved Knowledge Providers.

Q3 Why were Innovation Vouchers developed?

The level of innovation amongst SMEs in Northern Ireland is low in comparison to UK wide levels. Innovation vouchers seek to encourage higher levels of innovation through collaboration with public sector Knowledge Providers.

Q4 What can I use an Innovation Voucher for?

Innovation is about doing things differently or doing different things to make your business better. An Innovation Voucher can help you take a creative approach to tackling specific business issues.

Typical projects are:

- Help to develop new or improved products, processes and services
- Access to information and expertise on new materials
- Tapping into research and scientific expertise
- Exploring new technologies
- Exploring new business models

See case study videos at www.investni.com/innovation and Invest NI's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIK6kxxhdrMVcuL3afa58wg>.

Q5 What can't I use an Innovation Voucher for?

Where an existing solution is readily available from the private sector, it is unlikely that an Innovation Voucher will be awarded.

Whilst we support a broad range of projects, there are some activities Invest NI will not support through an Innovation Voucher. These are:

- Standard mobile apps.
- General sales activities.
- Standard business advice.
- General marketing activities.
- Buying training for your business.
- Buying equipment for your business.
- Business plans and economic appraisals.
- Website development and online optimisation.
- Internships for students from knowledge institutions.
- Software purchases and basic software development.
- Aid that would promote or subsidise the cost of exports.
- Achieving compliance with statutory regulations or legislation.
- Testing products that are not within the ownership of your business.
- Project costs incurred prior to the issue date of the Innovation Voucher.

If support for your project is available under another Invest NI programme, an Innovation Voucher will not be awarded. Invest NI will refer you to the appropriate programme team.

Q6 Who is eligible to apply?

Innovation Vouchers are open to Northern Ireland based SMEs, social enterprises and third sector organisations. This includes sole traders, partnerships, limited companies, new start-ups and pre-trading entities including individuals/potential entrepreneurs with a project that could be commercialised.

You can apply for an Innovation Voucher if:

- You are a small enterprise, social enterprise or third sector organisation with less than 50 employees and either an annual turnover and/or annual balance sheet not exceeding €10 million.
- You are a medium enterprise, social enterprise or third sector organisation with more than 50 employees but less than 250 employees, and either an annual turnover not exceeding €50 million or an annual balance sheet not exceeding €43 million. You must not have received assistance through Invest NI's Grant for R&D programme in the past five years.

View the EU definition of a SME: https://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/business-friendlyenvironment/sme-definition_en

Exemptions

Companies in the transport and primary agricultural sectors cannot apply for an Innovation Voucher in line with State Aid Guidelines.

Q7 Can a group of businesses apply together?

Up to five businesses can apply separately and come together to 'pool' their Innovation Vouchers to solve a common issue. This is referred to as a Pooled Project. Each applicant should complete a standard application form and explain in the background section that it is a pooled application.

If successful, each applicant will receive an innovation voucher worth up to £5000 and these vouchers can be combined to allow a larger piece of work to be carried out.

If you have any questions about the pooled application process, please contact our Business Support Team on 0800 181 4422 or via <http://www.investni.com/contact-us.html>

Q8 How can I apply for an Innovation Voucher?

You can apply for an Innovation Voucher during one of our open calls using the online application form at www.investni.com/innovation

MYINI Registration

Before you can access the Innovation Voucher application form, you will need to answer a few preliminary questions at www.investni.com/innovation to check that you are eligible to apply. If you meet the criteria, you will be invited to register on Invest NI's MYINI portal, where you can access, update or submit your application form.

Call for Applications

Invest NI holds four calls for Innovation Voucher applications during the year and each call is generally open for 3 weeks. The date of the next call is available at www.investni.com/innovation.

Printed copies of the online application will **not** be accepted.

Online applications cannot be submitted after the closing date and time of each call.

Please familiarise yourself with the [Innovation Voucher Guidance Notes \(PDF\)](#) before completing and submitting your application.

Accessibility

If you have a disability which affects your ability to access the online application process, please contact us so we can discuss your particular needs and ensure that you are able to complete the information required to submit an application.

Please do not hesitate to contact our Business Support Team on 0800 181 4422 between 8.30am and 5pm Monday to Friday or via <http://www.investni.com/contact-us.html>

Q9 What happens after I submit my application?

The submission deadline for Innovation Voucher applications is always 3pm on the final day of the call. We recommend you submit your application well before the closing deadline as late forms will not be accepted.

Following the submission deadline, your application will be reviewed by the Assessment Panel. We aim to notify you of the Panel's decision within four weeks of the closing date of the call. Decisions will also be available on your MYINI account.

If you are successful, your innovation voucher will be e-mailed to you.

Unsuccessful applicants will be notified of the decision by e-mail.

Q10 Can I apply again if I am unsuccessful?

Yes. If you have been unsuccessful you can contact the Innovation Voucher Team to request specific feedback on your application. If appropriate, you may wish to apply again in the future, taking this feedback into account.

Q11 How do I use my Innovation Voucher?

The first step is to identify a Knowledge Provider that can help with your project. You might already know who you want to work with, but if not you can use the information and contact

details at <https://www.investni.com/innovation-vouchers-knowledge-providers> to explore your options. Please feel free to contact the Innovation Voucher Co-ordinators directly to check if a particular provider can assist. The Innovation Voucher Team can also help you identify an appropriate Knowledge Provider.

You do not need to select a Knowledge Provider in advance of submitting your application, but it can be useful to discuss your project in advance to determine how a Knowledge Provider might be able to help within the scope of a £5000 innovation voucher.

Once the voucher has been awarded, you can contact the Knowledge Provider that you wish to work with. It can be helpful to share your application form with the Provider so that they can understand the issue and see what is required. The Knowledge Provider will agree a Terms of Reference (ToR) with you for your project work. This should broadly reflect the project as outlined in your application form.

Once agreed, the Knowledge Provider will forward the ToR to Invest NI for approval, covering the scope, timeframe, deliverables and costs of the project. Invest NI then issues a purchase order to the Knowledge Provider and work on your project can commence.

As Knowledge Providers are publicly funded research organisations, they will offer their services from within their existing resources.

Q12 Can I use my Innovation Voucher with a private sector provider?

No, your Innovation Voucher cannot be used, either directly or indirectly, to fund services provided to your business by a private sector provider.

In certain instances, in agreement with the Knowledge Provider and Invest NI, up to 20% of your Innovation Voucher may be sub-contracted to an external party outside of the pool of approved providers if the necessary skills and expertise is not available from the Knowledge Provider.

In such instances, the Knowledge Provider will manage the agreement with the subcontractor and ensure that Invest NI is made aware prior to work commencing.

Q13 Should I expect a commercial product as an output of the Innovation Voucher project?

No, you should not expect a finished, commercial product as an output of your project. Your Innovation Voucher covers up to £5,000 of work by the Knowledge Provider. Examples of the type of project outputs you can expect include:

- reports;
- technical design drawings;
- technical specifications;

- technology roadmaps;
- rough product or process prototypes; or
- results of specific analysis.

You will need to agree project outputs and key deliverables at the outset with the Knowledge Provider and ensure this is clearly detailed in the Terms of Reference.

Q14 Are Innovation Vouchers subject to VAT?

Yes, Innovation Vouchers are subject to VAT. Innovation Vouchers are issued exclusive of VAT and the value of the voucher cannot be used to cover the VAT.

You will be responsible for the payment of VAT irrespective of whether or not your business is registered for VAT. If you are a VAT registered business, you might have the option of reclaiming through normal VAT procedures. More information on VAT can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/vat-returns/overview>.

VAT is liable on the project cost. With a project cost of £5000 for example, you will be required to pay £1000.

On completion of the Innovation Voucher project, the Knowledge Provider will invoice you directly for the VAT payment.

A subsequent application for another Innovation Voucher will not be considered unless the VAT has been paid.

Q15 How do I pay for the service(s) provided by the Knowledge Provider?

When the programme of work has been completed as per the agreed Terms of Reference, the Knowledge Provider will invoice Invest NI for reimbursement of up to the £5,000 as covered by the Innovation Voucher.

In the event that the final costs are greater than the Innovation Voucher value, this will have been discussed and agreed between your business and the Knowledge Provider and clearly detailed in the Terms of Reference.

Your business will be responsible for payment of any additional amounts over and above the £5,000 voucher, as well as the VAT associated with the entire project cost.

Please refer to Q18 for information relating to 2nd and 3rd vouchers.

Please note: In awarding the Innovation Voucher, Invest NI is not commenting on the full cost, scope or deliverables of the project. You should be aware that the full cost of your project may be considerably greater than £5,000 and this must be considered carefully when discussing the project with the Knowledge Provider.

Q16 What information will you hold about my business?

Any personal data you provide to Invest NI will be handled in line with the Data Protection legislation.

- We will store this information securely and retain it only as long as is necessary under public sector requirements.
- We will share your personal data with knowledge providers for the specific purposes of this programme.
- We may also share your personal data with our sponsor department, the Department for the Economy, for governance purposes and also with other public bodies, such as local Councils, for economic development purposes.

As the Innovation Voucher is sourced from public funds Invest NI will, in the interest of openness and transparency, proactively publish limited information on the scheme including:

- Name of applicant
- Application title
- Amount of assistance

Invest NI will not publish any other personal or commercial information you provide as part of this application process.

For full details on how we use your personal data, including your rights, please visit www.investni.com/privacy

Q17 How many Innovation Vouchers can I receive?

An applicant can receive up to 3 Innovation Vouchers for different projects. The Innovation Voucher clock was reset at May 2020. This means that all applicants, even those that have received three prior to May 2020, start with a 'clean slate' and can potentially receive three vouchers over a rolling five year period.

It is only possible to have one 'active' voucher at any point in time and your business will not be eligible for further Innovation Vouchers until your account with the Knowledge Provider is settled in full, including the payment of VAT.

Q18 What are the funding levels for Innovation Vouchers?

1st Innovation Voucher £5,000

Your business will pay for the VAT associated with the project and any project costs over and above the voucher value.

First vouchers are designed to encourage businesses which have not teamed up before with a Knowledge Provider. Invest NI's aim is to nurture this type of collaboration, so we may give priority to businesses that are new to working on a formal basis with a specific department within academic and research institutions.

Note: All innovation vouchers awarded during the May 2020 call (ie the start of a new Phase of the programme) will be regarded as 1st vouchers. This applies to those applicants who have received innovation vouchers prior to May 2020.

2nd Innovation Voucher £5,000

The second voucher is worth 80% of the project cost to a maximum of £5000. Your business must pay the remaining 20% of the cost and all of the VAT.

3rd Innovation Voucher £5,000

The third voucher is worth 70% of the project cost to a maximum of £5000. Your business must pay the remaining 30% of the cost and all of the VAT.

Example

Based on a £5,000 project

Voucher	Project Cost	Voucher Value	Voucher recipient Contribution	VAT (20% of project cost). Payable by voucher recipient.	Total Cost to voucher recipient.
1st	£5,000	100% of project cost	0%	£1,000	£1,000
2nd	£5,000	80% of project cost	20% (£1000)	£1,000	£2,000
3rd	£5,000	70% of project cost	30% (£1500)	£1,000	£2,500

Note: 1st, 2nd and 3rd vouchers are each worth up to £5000. Vouchers may be used in part payment of larger projects than the examples above. In that case, the voucher recipient will pay the balance as well as all VAT.

VAT registered businesses may be able to reclaim the VAT through normal VAT procedures. More information can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/vat-returns/overview>

Q19 What can a Knowledge Provider claim as eligible costs on Innovation Voucher projects?

All researchers employed by a Knowledge Provider may receive payment for the work undertaken in an Innovation Voucher project, provided such payments are within the terms and conditions of the individual's contract with the Knowledge Provider.

Salary costs for work undertaken by students recruited by the Knowledge Providers on short term contracts for the purposes of the Innovation Voucher project are also permitted.

Small items of equipment and materials may be purchased as required, providing these are agreed in advance between your business and the Knowledge Provider. However, this does not include the purchase of equipment and materials that the Knowledge Provider would normally be expected to have available onsite.

Small amounts of travel (such as mileage) may also be allowed, providing this is agreed in advance between your business and the Knowledge Provider

Invest NI normally expect at least 70% of the claimed costs of any Innovation Voucher project to go towards paying for the skills and expertise of the Knowledge Provider.

Q20 How long is an Innovation Voucher valid for?

An Innovation Voucher is valid for nine months from the date of issue and project work must be completed within this period. Each Innovation Voucher issued includes a voucher number and expiry date.

Q21 What happens if the expiry date is approaching and project work has not been completed?

Please contact the Innovation Voucher team at Invest NI as early as possible to discuss.

Q22 Will my business own any Foreground IP generated during the Innovation Voucher project?

Foreground IP is the intellectual property that is conceived, created, or developed by the Knowledge Provider on your behalf during the course of the Innovation Voucher project.

Any foreground IP developed as a result of the Innovation Voucher project will belong to or be assigned to your business, unless you and the Knowledge Provider have agreed otherwise.

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