

INVEST NI AMBITION TO GROW SUPPORT SCHEME GUIDANCE NOTES

This document provides guidance on the Ambition to Grow (ATG) Support Scheme including eligibility Criteria, application process and information required. If you are considering applying for ATG, please read this document along with our [FAQs](#) carefully before submitting an application.

OVERVIEW

Invest Northern Ireland (Invest NI) has launched a new grant scheme to support businesses to increase employment levels and generate new sales from customers outside Northern Ireland.

The scheme will provide grant support to 40 eligible companies to help them create 3+ new full time permanent positions within the business as well as assisting them with the costs of targeting customers outside Northern Ireland, technical development activities, as well as upskilling existing and new employees.

The **maximum** level of grant support will be £45,000 per applicant with the amount of grant offered dependant on activities listed within the application form as well as Invest NI budget availability. The grant will be earned over 2 years - dependent on key activities and expenditure being made.

It is hoped that ATG will attract a spread of applications from throughout all areas of Northern Ireland. ATG is managed and administered by Invest NI.

The call for applications will open at **12 noon on Monday 24 October 2022** and will close at **12 noon on Friday 25 November 2022**. Invest NI reserves the right to close the application call earlier depending on the volume of applications received. In this case only applications completed on the portal will be considered.

Please note this is a **two-stage competitive application process**. The first stage is the completion of an **online application**, which will then be assessed and scored against the scheme criteria. The second stage will involve the top ranking applications being invited for a **face to face interview** (Covid-19 restrictions permitting) at the Business Premises in order to validate the information provided.

As the budget for this scheme is limited, once all funding is allocated no further offers can be made during this call.

Should an applicant decline to accept an offer, it may be offered to the next ranked application. Should there be additional budget available, and further application calls

open, applicants that are unsuccessful in this call will be able to submit an application in future calls.

ELIGIBILITY

Ambition to Grow is aimed at Start ups, Micro, Small to Medium Enterprises based in Northern Ireland, that have either turnover under £1m or sales to customers outside NI of less than £300k. Invest NI is seeking to support businesses in the manufacturing or International tradeable services sectors that have plans to increase sales from customers outside Northern Ireland and with this increase employment levels. Businesses that are involved in innovative activities, paying higher salaries for new positions as well as those adding value to a product are also likely to score highly. Please see page 17 of our [current business strategy](#) and The Department for the Economy's [10X Economic Vision](#).

This scheme is only open to businesses that are not currently Invest NI customers, that have not received an offer or payment of grant support from Invest NI within the last 5 years, and that do not owe any outstanding liabilities to Invest NI.

Businesses that have previously received an offer of support under any Invest NI scheme (not including Covid-19 emergency support measures, Economic Recovery Innovation Grant (ERIG), Innovation Vouchers or Access to Finance funding e.g. Techstart Proof of Concept grant) can apply as long as no Invest NI offers or grant payments have been made to the Company within the last 5 years, subject to all other criteria being met.

Therefore, current Invest NI customers are not eligible to apply and should contact their Client Executive if they wish to discuss support towards export growth activities.

Businesses must meet all of the following criteria:

- The business must be based in Northern Ireland, with Directors based in Northern Ireland
- The business must be an [SME](#)
- The business must provide a value added commercial product and/or service.
- The business must be able to demonstrate that it is a viable business and will remain so for the duration of the project, with evidence that your business has sufficient resources to meet the match funding requirement
- The business must currently have either annual turnover less than £1m or have annual sales to customers outside NI less than £300k
- The business must intend to increase employee headcount by a minimum of 3 new full time permanent employees over the next 18 months
- The business must intend to grow sales from customers outside NI.
- The proposed business activity must be a strategic fit with our [current business strategy](#) and aligned to The Department for the Economy's [10X 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 project.
- 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 any member of Senior Management within the business that are subject to a current bankruptcy order, Individual Voluntary Arrangement, Company Voluntary Arrangement, County Court Judgement, or Company Director Disqualification.
- Businesses involved in Agricultural Production, Fisheries & Aquaculture Sectors (Production and Processing), Steel, Coal, Shipbuilding, Synthetic Fibres, Transport and its infrastructure, Energy generation, wholesale, retail (including on-line), distribution & infrastructure.
- Applications which include or relate to activities that Invest Northern Ireland 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 scheme is to incentivise Northern Ireland based SME's to grow into markets outside Northern Ireland ("external markets") and to increase their employment levels here through the addition of a number of well paid jobs.

For an application to be considered eligible, it must outline the creation of a minimum of 3 new positions within the business, over and above those currently employed.

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 or activities that result in the development of new products and services.

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

- £5,000 per new job (a minimum of 3 to be created) over and above existing employment levels within the business (to a maximum of £30,000).
- £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 and development of an export growth plan by 01 March 2023, to the satisfaction of Invest NI.

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

New employment must be the creation of permanent NI based positions directly within the business and is based on the creation of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) roles. A full time employee (1 FTE) is a new employee contracted for a minimum of 30+ hours per week, with a part time employee (0.5 FTE) being a new employee contracted for 16-30 hours per week. The application can contain a mixture of proposed full time and part time employees.

Eligible business development activities are costs 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:

Trade Fairs & Exhibitions outside NI – attendance or participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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 NI including design, production & 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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Costs for publicity and promotional materials (excluding printing costs)
Product & Business Development Consultancy Fees and Expenses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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.
- Items already part of a business's outgoings or overheads.
- Travel and accommodation costs.
- Expenditure related to growing sales of the business in NI.

- 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.
- Software purchases or regular subscriptions.
- 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 project period, with all activities to be completed and grant claimed within 18 months of the date of an offer being issued.

TIMESCALES

ATG is a competitive call for applications. The call for applications will open at **12 noon on Monday 24 October 2022** and will close at **12 noon on Friday 25 November 2022**

It will not be possible to submit applications after this deadline, and the call may be closed early depending on the volume of applications received.

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 provided 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

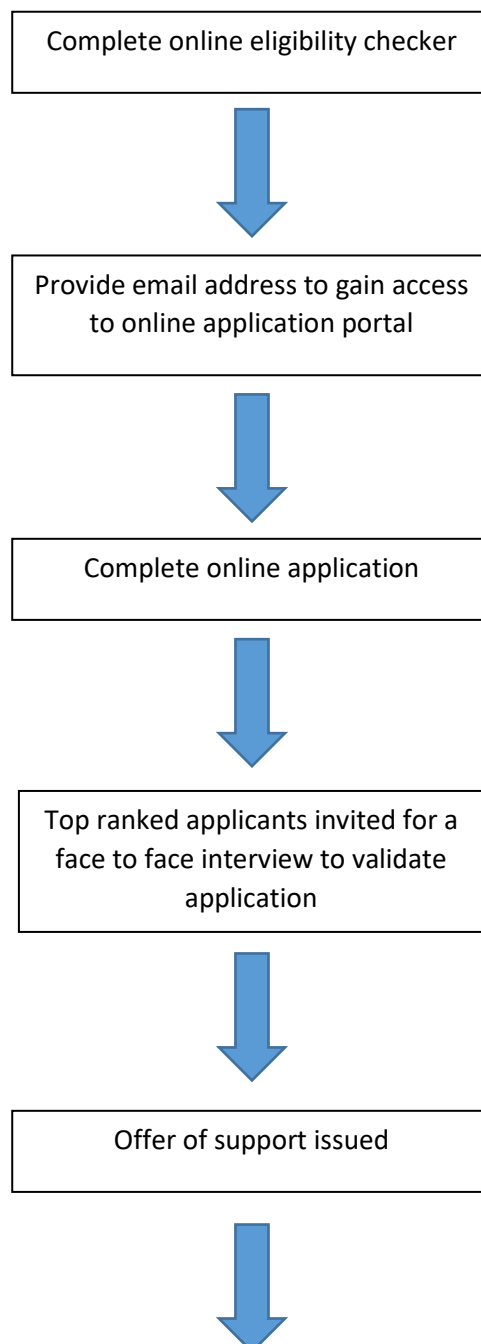
The first step is to check that you are eligible to apply for ATG by using the eligibility checker, which will be available from **12 noon on Monday 24 October 2022** at investni.com/ambitiontogrow.

If you meet the eligibility criteria, you will be issued with a link to an online application form via our online portal. In addition to completing the online application form, if an existing business, you will also need to provide a digital copy of your most recently completed annual accounts (to include a Profit & Loss Account and Balance Sheet), together with any recently available management accounts.

Please note the maximum size of each item provided digitally is 20MB.

The application form should take approximately 2 hours to complete, if you have all the information to hand. The application has been designed to be completed by the owner/operator of the business. If the applicant gets through to the interview stage, this will be conducted with company management. It is hoped that this will ensure the businesses with a genuine interest in generating the greatest economic return will be successful, rather than those most proficient at completing application forms.

You can save a draft of your application and return to it at any time prior to the application call closing. You will need to click on the **'Submit'** button when you have completed the application.



Begin project

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 above, with the top 10 ranked applications in each Region that meet or exceed the minimum threshold being invited for a validation interview and on successful completion will then be offered financial support towards their proposed project.

Your project will be assessed by your Invest NI Regional Office based on the information you provide in your application form, with the top scoring applications in the area being invited for a face-to-face interview (COVID-19 restrictions dependant) to validate the information provided in the application. Assuming the interview is passed, an offer of support will then be issued. Should all businesses interviewed not pass this part of the process, the next highest scoring companies will be offered an interview until all offers have been made. It is anticipated that each of the 4 Invest NI Regional Offices will make offers to 10 businesses, a total of 40 spread across Northern Ireland.

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

Assessment Criteria	Maximum Score
<p>1. How well does the project fit with the Invest NI and NI Government strategy for economic development?</p> <p>Please see page 17 of our current business strategy.</p>	20
<p>2. How much of a difference will Invest NI support make to the projects speed, scope and/or scale? Would some or all of the activity happen anyway, regardless of getting grant support?</p>	30
<p>3. What level of risk is attached to Invest NI providing a grant to the business, what is the likelihood of project success, how financially viable is the business and what is the likelihood it will be financially viable in the future?</p>	20
<p>4. Is the project economically efficient? How much do the benefits of the project for the business and Invest NI exceed the costs?</p>	20
	5

5. Will the project displace the sales of other businesses in NI or GB?	
6. What impact will your project have on the labour market in NI and GB?	5

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

ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Know Your Customer

It is important that in the administration of public funds that Invest NI is diligent in its checks and knows it's customer before proceeding with on-boarding.

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

This Know Your Customer 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, 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 Know Your Customer process.

If any misleading information or elevated risk factors are found in your application, it could 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 at least 40% in each criterion. Any application that does not meet this threshold will be deemed ineligible for funding.

Where two or more applications have the same overall score:

- the higher score in Criteria 1 will be given priority
- if scores are still equal, the higher score in Criteria 2 will be given priority
- if scores are still equal, the higher score in Criteria 3 will be given priority
- if scores are still equal, the higher score in Criteria 4 will be given priority
- if scores are still equal, the higher score in Criteria 5 will be given priority
- if scores are still equal, the higher score in Criteria 6 will be given priority

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

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

Funding will be awarded to applicants in the Regional Office area that pass the interview 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.

This is a pilot scheme, and future calls will be dependent on its success as well as availability of budget. Should a business be unsuccessful with its application, it can submit an application to future calls as and when they open.

NOTIFICATION OF FUNDING DECISION

Following closure of the application call at **12 noon on Friday 25 November 2022 (or earlier depending on the volume of applications)** the received applications will be assessed, with the top scoring applicants invited for an interview when the scoring process is complete. This is anticipated to be within 3 weeks of the call closing.

If you hope to secure Invest NI funding for your project, 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 for the project to proceed will be placed in question and will likely impact the scoring of the application.

Following the interview stage, 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 10 ranked applications in each Region that meet or exceed the minimum threshold being invited for a validation interview and on successful completion will then be offered financial support towards their proposed project.

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 further 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](#).

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 against you 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 the application and the business securing new employees, with the expectation that increased employment is maintained for a minimum of 5 years. Should new employees be taken on, grant be drawn down and then employment levels decrease within 5 years from payment of grant, it is reasonable to expect that repayment of grant money (in full or in part) will be requested.

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 18 months
- An increase in the sales of your product or service outside Northern Ireland
- Financial transparency

- Quarterly progress reports
- A commitment to be an environmentally and socially responsible business

A full outline of conditions will be provided to the successful 40 businesses in an Invest NI Letter of Offer to be signed and returned by the applicant in order for the support to be available.

DATA PROTECTION AND HANDLING

ATG is managed and administered by Invest 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 fund including:

- name of applicant
- application title
- amount of assistance

Invest 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

ATG is Selective Financial Assistance. As such it operates in accordance within 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 ATG scheme, 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.