

INVEST NORTHERN IRELAND

AMBITION TO GROW | SUPPORTING WOMEN

October 2025

GUIDANCE NOTES

This document provides guidance on our Ambition to Grow | Supporting Women (ATG | SW) programme including eligibility criteria, application process and information required. If you are considering applying for ATG | SW, please read this document along with our [Frequently Asked Questions](#) carefully before applying.

OVERVIEW

The programme is designed to support micro, small and medium sized enterprises (SME's), to access support, increase employment levels and generate or grow sales outside Northern Ireland. We particularly welcome and encourage applications from women-led businesses.

It provides grant support to eligible businesses on a competitive basis to help them create new employment, assist with the costs of targeting markets outside Northern Ireland, technical development activities and upskilling existing and new employees.

The maximum level of grant support offered through ATG | SW is £30,000 per applicant with the amount of grant offered dependent on activities listed within the application form as well as our budget availability. Payment of grant will be dependent on key activities being undertaken and expenditure being incurred.

The application call will open on **Monday 6 October 2025 at 9:00** and close on **Friday 31 October 2025 at 12 noon**. We reserve the right to close the application call early or extend the deadline based on the number of submissions. Only applications received at the time of closing 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 be assessed and scored against the programme criteria. The second stage will involve the top-ranking applications from stage one being invited for a validation meeting to discuss the information provided in the application form and this meeting will be scored on a pass/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.

ELIGIBILITY

The programme is aimed at businesses that are not currently Invest NI clients and that have not received an offer or payment of grant support from us within the last five years (not including Covid-19 emergency support measures, Economic Recovery Innovation Grant, Innovation Vouchers or Access to Finance funding such as the Techstart Proof of Concept grant).

To be eligible to apply, businesses must meet all the following criteria:

- The business must be based in Northern Ireland, with at least one director, partner or proprietor based in Northern Ireland (this person should be the participant on the programme).
- The business must operate within the manufacturing or tradeable services sector.
- The business must be a small or medium-sized enterprise with fewer than 250 employees and either a turnover of €50 million or less, or a balance sheet total of €42 million or less.
- The business must be trading and have an annual turnover of less than £1million or annual sales to customers outside Northern Ireland less than £300,000.

- The business must not have received grant support from us within the last five years, have a current offer, or be planning to accept an offer of support (excluding COVID-19 emergency funds, Economic Recovery Innovation Grant (ERIG), Innovation Vouchers or Access to Finance funding). If your business meets all other criteria but has received support from us in the last five years, contact your Client Executive to discuss whether you can apply.
- The business must plan to create at least two new full-time equivalent (FTE) jobs before January 2028.
- The business must aim to increase sales to customers outside Northern Ireland.
- The business must be able to show that it is viable and likely to remain so during the period of our support, with evidence of sufficient resources to cover any funding gaps.
- The proposed business activity must align with our [Business Strategy 2024- 2027](#).
- The Business must agree to our Know Your Customer (KYC) checks.

EXCLUSIONS

The following businesses are not eligible to apply:

- Businesses who have already applied or planning to apply for support for similar activities.
- Businesses or associated businesses with an outstanding liability to us due to grant clawback proceedings. However, if a satisfactory repayment plan is in place, the business may apply and be considered on a case-by-case basis.
- Businesses, or any member of senior management, subject to a bankruptcy order, Individual Voluntary Arrangement (IVA), Company Voluntary Arrangement (CVA), County Court Judgement (CCJ), or Company Director Disqualification or who fail Invest NI's KYC checks.
- Businesses whose core activities include agricultural production; fisheries and aquaculture sectors (production and processing); steel; coal; shipbuilding; synthetic fibres; transport and its infrastructure; tourism accommodation; visitor attractions, energy (generation, distribution, and its infrastructure); wholesale; retail (including on-line), and distribution.
- Applications related to activities that we consider as ineligible. This includes industries or businesses which may cause reputational risk to us, such as gambling, tobacco products, cannabis-based products not authorised as medicines and adult entertainment.
- Charities.
- Businesses owned by Invest NI staff members.

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

ELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES

This programme aims to encourage Northern Ireland based SMEs, particularly those that are women-led, to grow into markets outside Northern Ireland and increase their employment levels by creating well-paid jobs.

To be eligible, an application must outline the creation of two new permanent FTE jobs, based in Northern Ireland.

FTE jobs can be a combination of full-time roles (contracted for 30+ hours per week and equivalent to 1.0 FTE) or part-time roles (contracted for 15-30 hours per week and equivalent to 0.5 FTE).

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

A maximum of £30,000 is available for each successful applicant as follows:

- Up to £15,000 towards new employment within the business. This includes up to £7,500 for each new FTE position created over current employment levels, with a maximum of two new FTE positions being supported.
- Up to £10,000 for business development where the support provided will be no more than 50% of the cost of eligible activities.
- £5,000 for completing an [Export Health Check](#), [Innovate NI Self-Assessment](#), and attending a series of Leadership Development workshops.

Grant money will be payable on completion of the activities detailed in Letter Of Offer

Examples of eligible activities include, but are not limited to:

Fairs & Exhibitions outside Northern Ireland (attendance or participation)

- Travel and accommodation for two company representatives.
- Stand rental costs.
- Stand assembly costs, such as fees for exhibition stand contractors.
- Stand operating costs, such as insurance, electricity, and interpreter services.
- Equipment transportation costs.
- Fees for exhibition speaking slots, VIP passes and pitch opportunities.

Marketing

- Specialist expertise not usually part of the client's regular spending for website design and promotional video and animation design.
- 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 such as Google, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram.

Product launches and seminars open days or special event days

- Costs for publicity and promotional materials, excluding printing costs.

Product and business development consultancy fees and expenses

- Specialist expertise not usually part of the client's regular spending.
- Packaging design.
- Product protection registration and legal costs.
- Costs for preparation for quality standards audit only, excluding the actual audit costs.

Training

- Non-mandatory training or qualification costs for employees agreed in advance with us.

The following costs are not eligible for the grant:

- Buying machinery or IT equipment.
- Costs for raw materials.
- Regular business expenses like rent or standard accounting services.
- Expenses related to increasing sales within Northern Ireland.
- Recruitment costs.
- Online marketing costs directly paid to platforms like Facebook, Google, and LinkedIn. However, costs incurred through a digital agency are eligible.

- Costs incurred before receiving the offer of support. Employees hired before the offer of support are not eligible for grant payment.

These lists are not exhaustive, and the eligibility of proposed expenses will be determined as appropriate.

The support will focus on activities within a defined timeframe, with all activities to be completed and the grant claimed within the dates specified within the offer of support.

TIMESCALES

The application call will open on **Monday 6 October 2025 at 9:00** and close on **Friday 31 October 2025 at 12 noon**. We reserve the right to close the application call early or extend the deadline based on the number of submissions. Only applications received at the time of closing will be considered.

Since this is a competitive call, please review the Assessment Process in this document and ensure your application form is complete before submitting. Corrections or additional information provided after the deadline will not be accepted. All required information must be included within the application form - additional documents, business plans or spreadsheets (except for accounts/management accounts and financial projections) will not be considered.

HOW TO APPLY

Complete the eligibility checker which will be available from **Monday 6 October 2025 at 9:00** investni.com/ambitiontogrow.


If you pass the initial eligibility checker, you will receive a link to an online application form via our online portal. We recommend you read the full eligibility criteria outlined above and [FAQ document](#) before applying.

In addition to the online application form, you need to provide a digital copy of your most recent annual accounts, including a profit and loss account and balance sheet and any recent management accounts. If your business has not yet compiled annual accounts, submit your most up to date management accounts.

The maximum size for each digital item is 20MB.

You can save a draft of your application and update it any time before submitting. We recommend you regularly save your application and click the 'Submit' button when completed.

The application should be completed by the business owner or director. If your application progresses to the second stage, the meeting will be conducted with the business owner or director.

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- Complete online eligibility checker
 - Provide email address to gain access to online application portal
 - Complete online application and upload requested documents
 - Top ranked applicants invited for a face-to-face meeting to validate application
 - Offer of support issued
 - Begin recruitment and business growth activities

ASSESSING YOUR APPLICATION

Your application will be reviewed by a panel made up of members from our Entrepreneurship Team. They will score all applications based on the criteria listed below. The top applications that meet or exceed the minimum score will be invited for a validation meeting, depending on budget availability.

If you pass the validation meeting, and the KYC checks, you will be offered financial support for your new employment and business growth activities.

The panel will assess applications using the following criteria:

Assessment Criteria	Maximum Score
<p>1. We will assess how well your application aligns with our Business Strategy.</p> <p>This includes how your business activities are linked to strategic sectors and future sectoral growth opportunities, how export focussed your business is and how you plan to create good new jobs.</p> <p>We will assess, based on information provided in your application, if your business has the longer-term potential to achieve at least 25% of sales to customers based outside Northern Ireland (or at least £250,000 external sales, whichever is lower); and the potential to employ at least 10 staff (within five years).</p>	20
2. We will assess what impact our support will have on you creating new jobs and carrying out new business development activities. Applications will need to demonstrate that our support will make a difference to what would happen if support was not provided.	30
3. We will assess the level of risk attached to your application. Applications that are deemed too high risk as well as applications that are deemed too low risk and able to proceed without our support are not likely to be successful. Our analysis of risk includes the viability of the business as well as the proposed activities and projected outcomes which must be deemed realistic and achievable.	20
4. We will assess the level of economic return projected. This will include the level of new sales projected outside Northern Ireland as well as the salaries of new jobs proposed.	20
5. We will assess what impact your proposal will have on the sales generated by other businesses based in Northern Ireland. This will take into consideration the number of local competitors carrying out similar activities.	5
6. We will assess what impact your proposal will have on the labour market in Northern Ireland.	5

Consider the assessment criteria and make sure your application clearly explains how you plan to create new jobs and grow your business into markets outside Northern Ireland.

To be considered for funding, you must achieve at least 40% in each criterion. If you don't meet this threshold your application will be ineligible for funding.

If two or more applications have the same overall score, we will prioritise the higher score in criterion one. If scores are still equal, we will prioritise the higher score in criterion two, and so on through criterion three, four, five, and six.

After the assessment process, we will rank eligible applications from highest to lowest score.

We will invite the top-ranking applications for a face-to-face meeting to validate the information provided. This meeting will be with programme participant who should be a director or owner of the business.

We will award funding to applicants who pass the second stage in order of ranking until we fully allocate available budget. Please note that even if we deem your application eligible, this does not guarantee funding, as we may allocate all funding before reaching lower-ranked applications.

If your application is unsuccessful, you can apply to future Ambition to Grow calls when they open.

Know Your Customer

Before Invest NI can offer financial support, we must carry out appropriate due diligence. To be considered for funding, your application must successfully pass our KYC process.

This process includes checks to confirm:

- Identity – valid photographic ID and supporting identity documentation
- Creditworthiness - credit checks on the applicant, named company individuals, and the company itself.
- Accuracy of Information – the information in your application must align with publicly available information and must not be misleading.
- Financial Standing – neither your business nor any senior management should be subject to:
 - bankruptcy orders
 - Individual Voluntary Arrangement, Company Voluntary Arrangements (IVA/CVA),
 - County Court Judgement (CCJ), or
 - Company Director Disqualification
- Linked Entities - you are not involved in a CVA through the applicant company or any linked company.

We will complete a credit check, review Companies House records, conduct online searches, and apply any other due diligence measures necessary to complete our KYC process.

If we identify misleading information or elevated risk factors, your application may be escalated for further review and a decision on whether to proceed.

NOTIFICATION OF FUNDING DECISION

After the application call closes at **12 noon on Friday 31 October 2025**, we will assess the applications. We intend to notify applicants of the outcome of their application within four weeks of the call closing.

If you want to secure funding from us for your new employment and business growth activities, do not start recruiting or spending money until you receive an offer of support from us. If you incur costs by signing contracts, starting work, raising invoices, or making payments before receiving a Letter of Offer, you cannot claim these costs and it could prevent you from getting any grant funding. Any argument that you need our support to proceed will be questioned and will impact your application's score.

APPEALS PROCEDURE

If you are unhappy with the outcome of your application, you can seek feedback on why your application did not score highly compared to others. We hope you will use this feedback to strengthen any future applications for Ambition to Grow calls.

If you are still unhappy with the outcome, you can request a review of your application's scoring. This review will be considered an appeal under Stage 1 of our Appeals Procedure, which we can provide upon request. You must submit any appeal within 30 working days of receiving the original decision notification to [ATG Appeals](#).

YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES

You must provide accurate and true information on your application. Providing false or misleading information is a crime and may be used in any criminal investigation.

We may share the information on this application form with other departments or agencies to prevent or detect crime.

Support is conditional on your business progressing as outlined in the application and securing new employees. You must maintain the assisted employment for at least two years. If you hire new employees, draw down the grant, and then reduce employment levels within two years of receiving the grant, we may seek repayment of the grant money, either in full or in part.

In return for our funding, we expect you to:

- Create good jobs, paying the Real living Wage, in your company within agreed timescales.
- Increase sales of your product or service outside Northern Ireland.
- Maintain financial transparency.
- Provide progress reports as requested.

We will provide a full outline of conditions to successful businesses in a Letter Of Offer, which you must accept for support to be available.

DATA PROTECTION AND HANDLING

We manage and administer the ATG | SW programme. We will have access to the information you provide in your application to assess your eligibility and conduct any post scheme governance assessments.

As this financial support comes from public funds, we will proactively publish limited information about the funding, including your name, application title and the amount of assistance you receive.

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

AUTOMATED DECISION MAKING

We will use automated decisions based on your responses to the online eligibility checker to assess your eligibility for an application form. Please ensure you select your responses to the eligibility checker carefully and accurately. If you believe an automated decision was wrongly made based on the information you provided, you can request a human review.

To request a review, complete our [enquiry form](#) and a member of our Business Support Team will contact you. Alternatively, you can call 0800 181 4422.

SUBSIDY CONTROL / STATE AID

ATG | SW operates in accordance with the UK Subsidy Control Principles or where appropriate EU State Aid Regulations.

GENERAL ENQUIRIES

If you have any enquiries about support available to your business, outside of the ATG | SW programme, please complete our [enquiry form](#) and a member of our Business Support Team will contact you. Alternatively, you can call 0800 181 4422.