

GROUNDWORK FOR **GROWTH**

Guidance notes



GUIDANCE NOTES

This guide was designed to help you understand more about our Groundwork for Growth programme. It explains who can apply, how to apply, and what information you will need. If you want to apply for Groundwork for Growth, please read this guide and the frequently asked questions section before you start your application.



OVERVIEW

Groundwork for Growth is designed to help businesses generate sales from customers outside Northern Ireland. The programme is for businesses that are not currently part of our client portfolio but can demonstrate that they can meet our criteria for becoming an Invest Northern Ireland client.

If your business is eligible, you can apply for a grant to help you reach new customers outside Northern Ireland, refine your products or processes, and upskill your employees.

You can apply for up to £15,000 in grant support. The amount of grant support offered will depend on the activities you propose and our available budget. We'll pay grant support at a rate of up to 50% of eligible costs, which means you need to spend money on eligible activities and then claim back a percentage of those costs in line with your offer of support.

As part of the programme you'll also attend a workshop focussed on growing your export sales, which will help you sell your product or service in new markets.

The Groundwork for Growth application process has two stages. First, you will complete an online application, which we will assess and score against the programme criteria. If your application passes the first stage, we will invite you to a validation meeting to discuss the information you provided. This meeting is the second stage in the process and will be scored on a pass or fail basis.

If you pass both stages, and complete satisfactory Know Your Customer (KYC) checks, we will issue you with an offer of grant support. The number of offers we issue will depend on our budget, and we will only make offers to the top scoring applicants.

The call for applications opens Monday 12 October 2026 at 9:00 and will close Monday 2 November 2026 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 closing time will be considered.

WHO CAN APPLY?

Groundwork for Growth is for micro, small, and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) based in Northern Ireland.



Eligibility Criteria

Your business must meet all these criteria:

- Your business is based in Northern Ireland, and at least one director, partner or proprietor must reside here.
- Your business has started trading and are generating sales and have an annual turnover under £2 million or annual sales to customers outside Northern Ireland of less than £250,000.
- Your business manufactures a product or provides a tradeable service.
- Your business is an SME (fewer than 250 employees and turnover equivalent of €50 million or less, or a balance sheet total equivalent of €42 million or less).
- You have access to £8,000 in available funds to commit to your Groundwork for Growth project.
- You can show your business is viable and will remain so for the foreseeable future.
- You are not currently an Invest Northern Ireland client. If you are unsure if you are a client company, please contact our Business Support Team via our [online enquiry form](#).
- Your business has the potential to employ at least ten staff in total, within five years.
- Your business has the potential to achieve at least 25% of sales to customers based outside of Northern Ireland (or at least £250,000 external sales, whichever is lower) within five years.



WHO CANNOT APPLY?

You cannot apply if:

- Your business has not started trading.
- Your business already receives, or plans to get, other government support for the proposed growth activities.
- Your main business activity is any of the following: primary agricultural production; fisheries and aquaculture (production and processing); steel, lignite, or coal; transport and its infrastructure; energy generation, distribution, or its infrastructure; tourism accommodation; visitor attractions; in-person healthcare services; in-person cosmetic and beauty services; wholesale; retail (including online); or distribution.
- Your business, or related businesses, owes money to Invest Northern Ireland because of grant recovery proceedings. If you have a repayment plan in place, you may be able to apply.
- Your business, or any member of your senior management team, is currently subject to a bankruptcy order, Individual Voluntary Arrangement (IVA), Company Voluntary Arrangement (CVA), County Court Judgement (CCJ), company director disqualification, or fails our KYC checks.
- Your application relates to activities we consider ineligible, including industries or businesses that may cause reputational risk to us, such as gambling, tobacco products, cannabis-based products not authorised as medicines, or adult entertainment.
- Your business is a charity.
- Your business is owned by an Invest Northern Ireland staff member.

If your business is linked to other businesses through shared or common ownership, you can only submit one application across these businesses.

If your business is in common or shared ownership with an existing Invest Northern Ireland client company, you should contact groundworkforgrowth@investni.com to enquire if you can apply.



ELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES

Groundwork for Growth support will assist you with the costs of targeting new customers outside Northern Ireland.

Your application must detail at least £20,000 of eligible costs to be considered valid, with the maximum level of supportable eligible costs being £30,000.

After you receive your offer of support, you can begin spending money on eligible activities. You can then claim back an agreed percentage (up to 50%) of these costs. You can submit a claim against your offer every three months, and your offer will remain valid for a period of 18 months.

Eligible costs are when you pay third-party providers who are independent from your business and who invoice you for their services and are related to growing your sales outside Northern Ireland. Examples of eligible costs include, but are not limited to:

Fairs and exhibitions (outside Northern Ireland)

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

Marketing

- Specialist expertise for website design, promotional video, or animation design (not part of your regular spending)
- Advertising outside Northern Ireland, including design, production, and placement costs (excluding the purchase of mailing or membership lists, pay-per-click, and display advertising costs for platforms like Facebook, Google, Instagram, and LinkedIn)

Product refinement

- Packaging design
- Intellectual protection

Business development

- Consultancy fees and expenses for specialist expertise (not part of your regular spending)

Training

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



INELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES



You cannot claim support for:

- Capital purchases (e.g. buying machinery or IT equipment)
- Raw materials
- Regular business expenses (e.g. rent or standard accountancy services)
- Expenses related to growing sales in Northern Ireland
- Online marketing costs paid directly to platforms like Facebook, Google, Instagram, and LinkedIn (costs through a digital agency are eligible)
- Costs incurred before you receive an offer of support

These lists are not exhaustive. We'll decide if your proposed costs are eligible or not when you apply. Support will only cover activities completed and claimed within the dates specified in your offer of support.



HOW TO APPLY

To apply, start by completing the eligibility checker, which will be available from **Monday 12 October 2026 at 9:00** at investni.com/groundworkforgrowth

If you pass the eligibility checker, you will gain access to the online application form through our portal. Please make sure you read the full eligibility criteria above before you apply.

When you fill out the online application, you must also upload a digital copy of your most recent annual accounts, including a profit and loss account and balance sheet, as well as any recent management accounts. If you do not have annual accounts yet, you can submit your most up-to-date management accounts instead. You must also upload evidence that you currently have access to at least £8,000 in available funds to invest in Groundwork for Growth activities.

You can save a draft of your application and update it at any time before you submit. We recommend saving your work regularly. When you are ready, click the 'Submit' button to send your application.

The business owner or director should complete the application. If your application moves to the second stage, the meeting will be with the business owner or director.



- 01** Complete online eligibility checker
- 02** Register or log in to the online application portal
- 03** Complete online application and upload requested documents
- 04** Top ranked applicants invited for a face-to-face meeting to validate application
- 05** Offer of support issued
- 06** Begin business growth activities

ASSESSING YOUR APPLICATION

Your local Invest Northern Ireland regional office will review and assess your application.

The highest-scoring applicants will be invited to a validation meeting to discuss their proposal. If you pass the validation meeting and successfully complete our KYC checks, we will offer you grant support for your new business growth activities.



The panel will assess applications using the following criteria:

Assessment Criteria		How is this scored?
1.	We will assess, based on information provided in your application, if your business has the 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).	Pass/Fail
2.	We will assess how well your application aligns with our Business Strategy . This includes how your business activities are linked to strategic sectors and future sectoral growth opportunities and how export-minded your business is.	20
3.	We will assess what impact our support will have on conducting the proposed new business development activities. Applications will need to demonstrate that our support will have an influence on what would happen if support were not provided.	20
4.	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
5.	We will assess the level of new sales projected outside Northern Ireland.	20
6.	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 conducting similar activities.	20



ASSESSING YOUR APPLICATION

(continued)



It is important that your application clearly explains how you will grow your business in markets outside Northern Ireland.

To achieve the pass mark, you must score at least 40% in every section.

If two or more applications have the same overall score, we will prioritise the higher score in section one. If scores are still tied, we will look at section two, section three, and so on. After we assess all applications, we will rank them from highest to lowest score.

We'll invite the top-ranked applicants to a face-to-face validation meeting which will be held with a company director or owner. We'll award funding to those who pass this second stage, in order of ranking, until the budget is fully allocated. Please note meeting the pass mark does not guarantee funding if the budget runs out before we reach your application.

Do not start spending money on business growth activities until you receive an official offer from us. If you start work, raise invoices, or make payments before you get an offer of support, you cannot claim those costs. This could also stop you from getting any grant funding as any claim that you need our support to proceed will be questioned and may lower your application score.



KNOW YOUR CUSTOMER (KYC)

Before we can offer financial support, we must complete due diligence checks. Your application must pass our KYC process to be considered for funding.

We will check:

- Identity – valid photo ID and supporting documents.
- Creditworthiness – credit checks on you, key company individuals, and the business.
- Accuracy of information – your application must match publicly available information and not be misleading.
- Financial standing – your business and senior managers must not be subject to:
 - Bankruptcy orders
 - Individual or Company Voluntary Arrangements (IVA/CVA)
 - County Court Judgments (CCJ)
 - Company director disqualification.
- Linked entities – you must not be involved in a CVA through the applicant company or any linked company.

We'll run credit checks, review Companies House records, conduct online searches, and apply other due diligence measures as needed. If we find misleading information or high-risk factors, we may escalate your application for further review before deciding whether to proceed.



NOTIFICATION OF FUNDING DECISION

We'll email you the outcome of your application. If your application is unsuccessful, you can apply again to future application calls.

APPEALS PROCEDURE

If you are unhappy with the outcome of your application, you can ask for feedback on why your score was lower than others.

We hope you use this feedback to strengthen future applications. If you are not satisfied after receiving feedback, you can request a review of your application's score. This review counts as Stage 1 of our Appeals Procedure, which we can provide on request.

You must submit your appeal within 30 working days of receiving your outcome notification email, by emailing gfgappeals@investni.com

YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES

You must provide accurate and truthful information in your application. Giving false or misleading information is a crime and may lead to a criminal investigation.

We may share your application details with other departments or agencies to prevent or detect crime.

Funding depends on your business, delivering what you outlined in your application and creating new jobs.

In return for funding, we expect you to:

- Commit to increasing sales of your product or tradeable service outside Northern Ireland.
- Maintain financial transparency.
- Provide progress reports when requested.

We'll give full details of these conditions in your Letter of Offer, which you must accept before support becomes available.



DATA PROTECTION AND HANDLING

We manage the Groundwork for Growth programme and use the information in your application to check your eligibility and conduct post-scheme reviews.

Because this funding comes from public money, we will publish limited details about your award, including your name, application title, and the amount of support you receive.

We manage your data in line with the law, including the General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018. For more details, see our [privacy notice](#).

AUTOMATED DECISION-MAKING

We use automated decisions based on your answers in the online eligibility checker to decide if you qualify for an application form. Please answer carefully and accurately.

If you think an automated decision was wrong, you can request a human review. To do this, complete our [online enquiry form](#) and a member of our Business Support Team will contact you. You can also call 0800 181 4422.

SUBSIDY CONTROL / STATE AID

Groundwork for Growth follows UK Subsidy Control Principles or, where relevant, EU State Aid Regulations.

What sort of businesses is Groundwork for Growth aimed at?

Groundwork for Growth targets manufacturing or tradeable services businesses that meet our client criteria of having:

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

Groundwork for Growth support is designed to be a steppingstone to realising this potential.

Although the external sales and employment levels detailed above do not need to be the outcome of your Groundwork for Growth project, which will typically cover the next 18 months, you do need to demonstrate that they are achievable within the next five years.

I am selling a product that is manufactured elsewhere. Can I apply?

This will depend on the nature of the product, how much input you have in terms of its design, ownership of any intellectual property and the level of sales you have generated to date.

It would be a good idea to discuss your proposal with our Business Support Team before starting an application. They can be contacted on 0800 181 4422 or by completing our [online enquiry form](#).

What do you mean by a tradeable service?

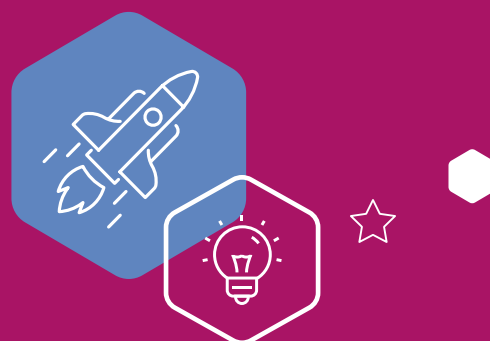
Tradeable services refer to services that can be sold to customers on an international basis, with the customer not being required to travel to the provider to take part in their services.

If you are unsure if your business provides a tradeable service, you can discuss it with our Business Support Team on 0800 181 4422 or by completing our [online enquiry form](#).

What is an external sale?

External sales are sales made to customers who are located outside Northern Ireland.

Only sales made directly to customers outside Northern Ireland are considered external sales. Indirect sales made through a Northern Ireland based distributor, wholesaler or contractor are not considered external sales.



Are customers who come to my premises from outside Northern Ireland counted as external sales?

No. To be considered an external sale the customer must be based outside Northern Ireland and your product or service must be able to be provided to them without the requirement for them to travel to your place of business within Northern Ireland.

What are Know Your Customer (KYC) checks?

KYC checks are an analysis of information relating to a business and the individuals involved in its operation that ensures the fullest picture of its current situation and historical activities is available to us. KYC checks include credit searches and analysis of publicly available databases to ensure the awarding of grant support is the correct decision.

My business is already an Invest Northern Ireland client, can I apply?

No. Groundwork for Growth is only open to businesses that are not currently clients. Businesses successful with their Groundwork for Growth application will become an Invest Northern Ireland client.

Current client companies should contact their client executive who will advise on what support options are available.

I have received Business Innovation Grant support. Can I apply for Groundwork for Growth?

If you have completed your Business Innovation Grant project, and are not yet a client, you can apply for Groundwork for Growth if you meet the eligibility criteria.

Who can I talk to about an application?

If you would like to discuss a potential application to Groundwork for Growth, you can contact our Business Support Team on 0800 181 4422 or by completing an [online enquiry form](#).



If you have questions about other support for your business outside the Groundwork for Growth programme, complete our [online enquiry form](#) and a member of our Business Support Team will contact you. You can also call 0800 181 4422.

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