Sovereign AI - Proof of concept Applicant Briefing

Date: **15 August 2025**

The webinar will start at 11:30

- Welcome, we are currently waiting for more people to join
- This briefing will be recorded. A copy of the slides and the recording link will be made available on IFS
- Please enter any questions that you may have into the Q&A Box
- For more information on the competition process, please view our YouTube channel

Welcome and Introductions

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UKRI Innovate UK

Agenda

- Key Dates

- Competition Summary & Scope

- Eligibility Criteria

- Innovation Funding Service (IFS)

- Funding Rules

- Assessment

- Use of AI

- Additional Support

- Q&A

Key Dates

Timeline	Date
Competition Opens	**11 August 2025**
Submission Deadline	**10 September 2025** at **11am**
Applicants informed	**14 October 2025** by **5pm**
Project start and end dates	Start by **1 January 2026** End by **31 March 2026**

UKRI Innovate UK

Competition Summary & Scope

Sovereign AI Introduction

Competition context

Sovereign AI Unit

"The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) has set up the Sovereign AI unit to build and harness the UK's AI capabilities to unlock economic growth and enhance UK national security."

Aim:

- Investing in UK companies to support AI national champions

- Create and develop UK AI assets and enablers (data, compute and talent)

- Make the UK partner of choice for Frontier AI companies

Sovereign AI Scope

Competition aim: Fund **Proof of Concept** projects of AI technologies with *State Of The Art* performance and/or *new to the world capability* in areas of *strategic importance* to UK

We are looking to fund innovations that could in principle deliver hyper scalable solutions and business models and contribute to building UK's AI sovereignty objectives.

Technologies much have in principle ability to scale at pace.

Your project must demonstrate that your technology could work in principle by focusing on at least development of a key critical component.

You can use synthetic or simulated data for development and validation of your project.

Sovereign AI Scope

Competition aim: Fund **Proof of Concept** projects of AI technologies with *State Of The Art* performance and/or *new to the world capability* in areas of *strategic importance* to UK

Technology maturity: We are anticipating projects to deliver at Technology Readiness Level (TRL) 3-5

Technology Readiness levels (TRL)

TRL3: Experimental proof of concept. Analytical and experimental critical function and/or Proof of Concept.

TRL 4: Technology validated in lab. Component and/or tool validation in laboratory environment.

TRL 5: Technology validated in relevant environment. Component and/or tool validation relevant environment.

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Sovereign AI Scope

Competition aim: Fund **Proof of Concept** projects of AI technologies with *State Of The Art* performance and/or *new to the world capability* in areas of *strategic importance* to UK

Your proposal must deliver one or more of the following:

- Proof of Concept of architecture or subsystem component
- Technical validation of capability of system or subsystem component
- Frontier AI performance that delivers new to the world capability or state of the art performance of existing capability
- Ability of architecture and business model to scale
- Demonstrate a clear path for access to data
- Demonstrate strategy to access compute infrastructure and quantity requirement for compute

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Sovereign AI Scope

Competition aim: Fund **Proof of Concept** projects of AI technologies with *State Of The Art* performance and/or *new to the world capability* in areas of *strategic importance* to UK

We are not funding projects that:

- are literature review studies
- do not require research and development
- are not delivering measurable objectives
- are unable to scale in principle

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Sovereign AI Scope

Competition aim: Fund **Proof of Concept** projects of AI technologies with *State Of The Art* performance and/or *new to the world capability* in areas of *strategic importance* to UK

Specific themes:

1. Fundamental AI research
2. AI for materials discovery
3. AI for biosciences and health
4. AI for defence and national security
5. AI aided design for semiconductors

Sovereign AI Scope

Competition aim: Fund **Proof of Concept** projects of AI technologies with *State Of The Art* performance and/or *new to the world capability* in areas of *strategic importance* to UK

Specific themes:

1. **Fundamental AI research:**
    - Embodied AI, sensory motor grounder systems
    - Safe by design architectures, multi agent systems, agentic AI
    - Novel architectures including neuro-symbolic, neuromorphic and biologically inspired models

Sovereign AI Scope

Competition aim: Fund **Proof of Concept** projects of AI technologies with *State Of The Art* performance and/or *new to the world capability* in areas of *strategic importance* to UK

Specific themes:

2. **AI for material discovery:**
   - Material discovery and property prediction
   - Generative and physics-ML hybrid models
   - Automated workflows and closed loop discovery

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Sovereign AI Scope

Competition aim: Fund **Proof of Concept** projects of AI technologies with *State Of The Art* performance and/or *new to the world capability* in areas of *strategic importance* to UK

Specific themes:

3. **AI for biosciences and health:**
   - Genomics and multi-omics models for medicine discovery
   - Foundational patient level health models
   - Foundational bioscience models
   - Scalable and secure monitoring and evaluation of health AI

Sovereign AI Scope

Competition aim: Fund **Proof of Concept** projects of AI technologies with *State Of The Art* performance and/or *new to the world capability* in areas of *strategic importance* to UK

Specific themes:

4. **AI for defence and national security:**
    - Real time and near real time systems
    - Distributed and decentralised systems
    - Specialised models for critical infrastructure and management and cybersecurity

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Sovereign AI Scope

Competition aim: Fund **Proof of Concept** projects of AI technologies with *State Of The Art* performance and/or *new to the world capability* in areas of *strategic importance* to UK

Specific themes:

5. **AI aided design for:**
   - AI accelerator chips
   - Neuromorphic hardware
   - Optical backplanes

Sovereign AI Scope

Competition aim: Fund **Proof of Concept** projects of AI technologies with *State Of The Art* performance and/or *new to the world capability* in areas of *strategic importance* to UK

Hypothetical examples

Fundamental AI research

- Novel use of LLMs: Repurpose of open models with tooling, RL, fine tuning for non-language applications
- Novel cross-attention layers for multi-modal systems
- Lightweight vision-language models for deployment on the EDGE
- Domain specific encoders for new foundational models, or frontier performance

Sovereign AI Scope

Competition aim: Fund **Proof of Concept** projects of AI technologies with *State Of The Art* performance and/or *new to the world capability* in areas of *strategic importance* to UK

Hypothetical examples

AI for material discovery

- Closed loop architecture for prediction → validation → prediction refinement loops
- Physics informed ML model to improve performance of models build with small/finite number of material property libraries

Sovereign AI Scope

Competition aim: Fund **Proof of Concept** projects of AI technologies with *State Of The Art* performance and/or *new to the world capability* in areas of *strategic importance* to UK

Hypothetical examples

AI for biosciences and health

- Encoders/decoders for multi-omics multimodal foundational models
- Domain fine-tuned models for health, life-sciences

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Sovereign AI Scope

Competition aim: Fund **Proof of Concept** projects of AI technologies with *State Of The Art* performance and/or *new to the world capability* in areas of *strategic importance* to UK

Hypothetical examples

AI for defence and national security

- Robust navigation AI systems under severe signal degradation
- Models for critical event detection in energy infrastructure management

Sovereign AI Scope

Competition aim: Fund **Proof of Concept** projects of AI technologies with *State Of The Art* performance and/or *new to the world capability* in areas of *strategic importance* to UK

Hypothetical examples

AI aided design (semiconductor)

- Tooling for design optimisation of AI inference chips
- NLP to HDL support tools

Sovereign AI Scope

Competition aim: Fund **Proof of Concept** projects of AI technologies with *State Of The Art* performance and/or *new to the world capability* in areas of *strategic importance* to UK

Scope assessment

1. Can you demonstrate that your proposal will produce state of the art performance in areas of strategic importance to UK?
2. Can you demonstrate that your proposal, both technology and business model can scale at pace?
3. Can you demonstrate that your project aligns with one of the 5 specific themes?
4. Can you demonstrate potential to safeguard UK's future economic growth, security and geostrategic influence?
5. Can you demonstrate delivery of measurable objectives during project outcome?

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Eligibility criteria

Eligibility Criteria – Your Project

Your project must:

- have total project costs of between **£50,000** and **£120,000**

- last between **1** and **3** months

- carry out all of its project work in the UK

- intend to exploit the results from or in the UK

- start by **1 January 2026**

- end by **31 March 2026**

This competition does not involve project partners.

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Eligibility Criteria – Lead Organisation

Lead organisation:

To lead a project your organisation must be a UK registered business of any size

More information on the different types of organisation can be found in our Funding rules.

Number of applications:

A business can only lead on one application.

Eligibility Criteria – Partners/Subcontractors

Subcontractors
Subcontractors **are** allowed in this competition.

Subcontractors can be from anywhere in the UK and you must select them through your usual procurement process.

You **cannot** use subcontractors from overseas.

All subcontractor costs must be justified and appropriate to the total eligible project costs.

Subcontracting costs are limited to 20% of total project costs, if you exceed this figure your application will be rendered ineligible.

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Previously submitted applications

This competition **does not** allow you to submit a previously submitted application.

Previously submitted application	Not a Previously submitted application
A previously submitted application is an application Innovate UK judges as <u>not</u> materially different from one you have submitted before (but it can be updated based on the assessors' feedback). If you have previously submitted an application that reached our assessment stage, you can re-apply once more with the same proposal.	A brand-new application, project or idea that you have not previously submitted into an Innovate UK competition. or A previously submitted or ineligible application which: • has been updated based on assessor feedback • <u>and</u> is materially different from the application submitted before • <u>and</u> fits with the scope of this competition

Innovation Funding Service (IFS)

How to apply

The lead applicant must create an account:

UK registered businesses

Use Companies House lookup using your company number.
This facilitates our checks later if you are successful.

Application Questions

Detailed guidance available on IFS

Application Form		Word Count	Appendix
Question 1	Applicant location (not scored)		No
Question 2	Animal testing (not scored)	Multiple choice	No
Question 3	Permits and licences (not scored)	Multiple choice	No
Question 4	International Collaboration (not scored)	400 words	No
Question 5	Trusted Research and Innovation (not scored)	400 words	No
Question 6	Need or challenge		No
Question 7	Approach and innovation		Yes – optional, 2 pages
Question 8	Team and resources		Yes – optional, 2 pages
Question 9	Market awareness		No
Question 10	Outcomes and route to market		No
Question 11	Wider impacts		No
Question 12	Project management		Yes – mandatory, 2 pages
Question 13	Risks		Yes – mandatory, 2 pages
Question 14	Added value		No
Question 15	Costs and value for money		No

National Security and Investment Act - overview

Subject to certain criteria, UK applicants are legally required to tell the government about acquisitions of certain entities in 17 sensitive areas of the economy (called 'notifiable acquisitions').
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-and-investment-act-guidance-on-notifiable-acquisitions/national-security-and-investment-act-guidance-on-notifiable-acquisitions

These 17 areas are:

- Advanced Materials
- Advanced Robotics
- Artificial Intelligence
- Civil Nuclear
- Communications
- Computing Hardware
- Critical Suppliers to Government
- Cryptographic Authentication
- Data Infrastructure

- Defence
- Energy
- Military and Dual-Use
- Quantum Technologies
- Satellite and Space Technologies
- Suppliers to the Emergency Services
- Synthetic Biology
- Transport

If there is significant uncertainty about whether an acquisition is notifiable, you may contact the government on **investment.screening@cabinetoffice.gov.uk** to seek a view or get legal advice from your own sources.

UK Strategic Export Controls - overview

UK strategic export controls - GOV.UK

The UK government has put together this guidance for those who export or transfer goods, software or technology (including data, information and technical assistance) which might be subject to strategic export controls.

It explains what control lists are, as well as who they apply to and when, so that exporters can make sure they comply with the law.

Applicants should assess how these controls may impact the project and confirm if they will need a licence (see question 5).

Q4 International Collaboration (not scored)

Does your proposed work involve any international collaboration or engagement?

You must provide details of any expected international collaboration or engagement. You must include a list of the names and the countries any international project co-leads, project partners, visiting researchers, or other collaborators are based in. You must also include details of any subcontractors or service providers.

If your proposed work does not involve international collaboration or engagement, your answer must confirm this.

Q5 Trusted Research and Innovation (not scored)

You must explain if your proposed project work relates to UKRI's Trusted Research and Innovation Principles, including:

- a list of any dual-use (both military and non-military) applications to your research
- a list of the areas where your project is relevant to one or more of the 17 areas of the UK National Security and Investment (NSI) Act)
- whether an export control license is required for this project under the *academic export control guidance* and the status of any applications
- a list of any items or substances on the UK Strategic Export Control List

We may ask you to provide additional TR&I information at a later date, in line with UKRI TR&I Principles and funding terms and conditions

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Project Impact questions

- Each organisation in your application will complete the Project Impact questions within the 'Supporting information' section

- The Project Impact questions ask for data about your business and innovation and its contribution to the UK economy, society, and the environment

- Visit the Project Impact guidance page for more information, the types of questions you will be asked and how to get further support

- By providing this data, you are enabling us to better understand the impact of our support. It will help us identify success stories and provide evidence to government and the public of the value of supporting innovative businesses

For more information:
- Watch Our Impact Management Framework video
- How is the Project Impact data collected? video

Your Project Cost Categories

View our **Application Finances Instructional Video**
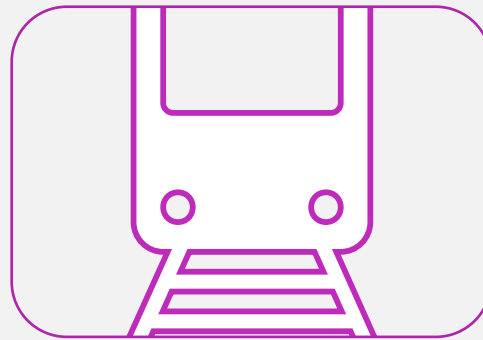
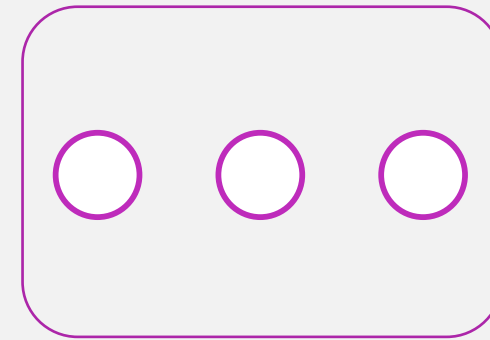Labour
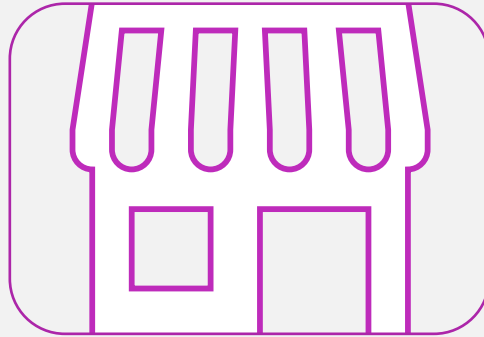
Overheads
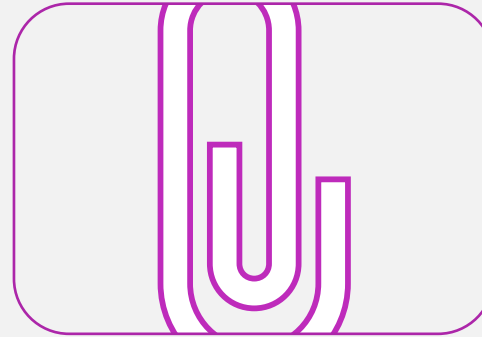
Materials
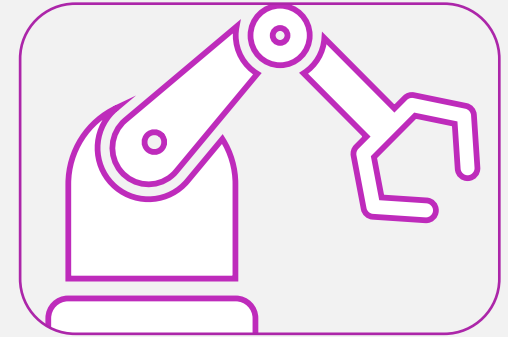
Capital Usage
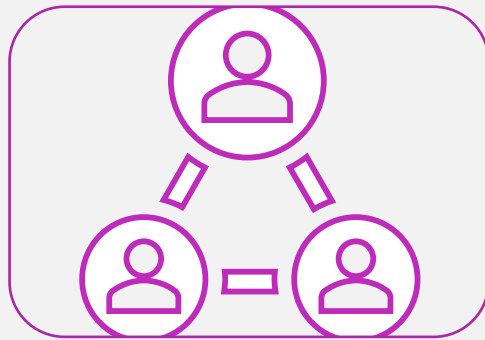
Subcontractors

Travel & Subsistence

Other

Your project finances

Finances

Your organisation is required to submit its project finances. Your organisation's project costs can be seen in the 'Finances overview'.

Your project finances — ✏ Incomplete

Finances overview — ✏ Incomplete

Finances

ℹ Only members from your organisation will be able to see a breakdown of your finances.

Please complete your project finances.

Your project costs — ✏ Incomplete

Your project location — ✏ Incomplete

Your organisation — ✏ Incomplete

Your funding — ✏ Incomplete

Your project costs
Add your project costs by category – refer to previous slide for link to instructional video

Your project location
Enter postcode for where most of the project work will take place.

Your organisation
Add details of your organisation including size, turnover and number of employees

Your funding
Include your funding level percentage according to the competition's funding rules.

You can declare Other Public Sector Funding here if you have previously received public money for **exactly** the same activities

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Checking your finances are complete

Finances summary

> ⚠ These organisations have not marked their finances as complete:
> - Ludlow
> - EGGS
>
> This application cannot be submitted until all items in the finances section have been marked as complete by all partners.

		Total costs (£)	Funding level (%)	Funding sought (£)	Contribution to project (£)	Other public sector funding (£)
Empire Ltd Lead organisation	✔	200,903	30.00	57,803	140,632	2,468
Ludlow Partner	⚠	200,903	30.00	57,803	140,632	2,468
EGGS Partner	⚠	990	100.00	990	0	0
Total	⚠	**£402,796**		116,596	281,264	4,936

Check your finances have been correctly entered, with the correct costs, funding level % and funding sought figures, as per the eligibility criteria of the competition.

IFS DOES NOT VALIDATE TOTAL PROJECT COSTS

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Terms and Conditions

Before you can submit your application, you **must** agree to the draft terms and conditions for this competition. Please ensure you share the T&Cs with your legal team at the earliest possible opportunity.

Terms and conditions
You must agree to these before you submit your application.

Award terms and conditions

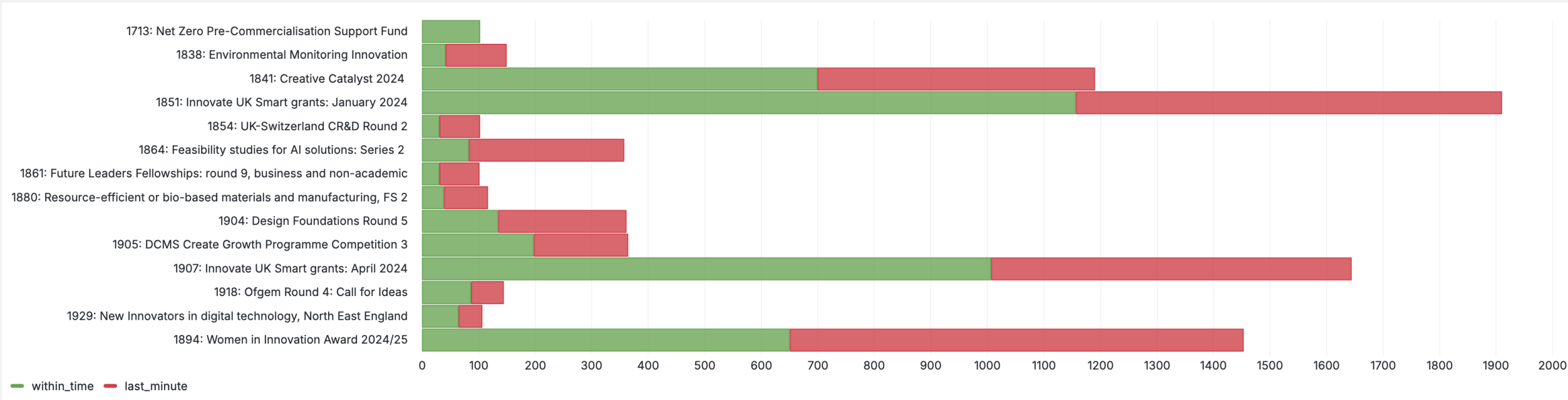✏ **Incomplete**

Review and submit   🖨 Print your application

✓ I agree to the full terms and conditions set out by the funding authority. I understand I need to agree to the final contract if my application is successful.

Agree and continue

Submitting your application

Customer Support can help resolve any issues you might have when submitting **but only if they are contacted before the deadline**.

Once the deadline has passed, your application cannot be submitted.

Chart legend: within_time (green), last_minute (red)

Competition	
1713: Net Zero Pre-Commercialisation Support Fund	
1838: Environmental Monitoring Innovation	
1841: Creative Catalyst 2024	
1851: Innovate UK Smart grants: January 2024	
1854: UK-Switzerland CR&D Round 2	
1864: Feasibility studies for AI solutions: Series 2	
1861: Future Leaders Fellowships: round 9, business and non-academic	
1880: Resource-efficient or bio-based materials and manufacturing, FS 2	
1904: Design Foundations Round 5	
1905: DCMS Create Growth Programme Competition 3	
1907: Innovate UK Smart grants: April 2024	
1918: Ofgem Round 4: Call for Ideas	
1929: New Innovators in digital technology, North East England	
1894: Women in Innovation Award 2024/25	

Pros & Cons of using AI to support you

With the advances in AI technology, it is only natural to use technology to support you in applying to our competitions. Whilst we don't recommend or advise against it, we would like to make you aware of the following which could potentially impact your project.

Pros

- Removes barriers for people with disabilities and non-English speakers

- Allows you to rephrase your content to meet the word count in a question

- Ensures all aspects of a question are answered

- Can aid a better understanding of:
  - intended/wider market
  - best practice in project management
  - complementary technologies and advances in the industry
  - expected project impacts

Cons

- It is not always accurate in its assumptions and can get things wrong

- AI learns from the information you give it as well as what it has already learnt

- May provide a generic response meaning your application could use similar phrasing to others

- AI can be detected as non-human as it lacks expression and insight because it relies on logic to summarise information based on the question asked

Whilst AI offers many benefits, it is important you are aware that **you are potentially sharing your idea with the world,** so be careful what you share as you have no control over how it is shared on once you do.

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Funding Rules

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Other Innovate UK projects

If you have an outstanding final claim or Independent Accountant Report (IAR) on a live Innovate UK project, you will not be eligible to apply to this competition, as a lead or a partner organisation.

We will not award you any further funding if you:

- applied to a previous competition as the lead or sole company and were awarded funding by Innovate UK, but did not make a substantial effort to exploit that award

- applied to a previous competition as the lead or sole company and failed to comply with grant terms and conditions.

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Compliance with the UK Subsidy Control Regime

On 4th January 2023, the [Subsidy Control Act 2022](#) came into effect.

This provides a framework for public authorities to design and award subsidies in a compliant way, whilst minimising any negative effects of subsidies both within the UK and Internationally.

Innovate UK offers funding in line with the UK's obligations and commitments to Subsidy Control. To ensure that Innovate UK remains compliant with the UK's international Subsidy Control duties in respect of:

- the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement;
- the subsidy control act 2022
- Article 10 of the Windsor Framework (successful applicants which are affected by the Windsor Framework will be funded in line with [EU State aid regulations](#))
- Article 138 of the Withdrawal Agreement (some Union law applicable after 31 December 2020 in relation to the UK's participation in Union programmes and activities)
- the Subsidies and Countervailing measures within the WTO (ASCM)
- any other Free Trade Agreements active at the time of award

All awards will be conditional on compliance at all times with the UK's international obligations on Subsidy Control - this will be reflected in the terms and conditions of any award.

Subsidy Control (and State aid where relevant)

The Subsidy Control Act 2022 definition of a 'subsidy' means financial assistance which:

1. is given by a public authority. This can be at any level: central, devolved, regional or local government or a public body.
2. makes a contribution (this could be a financial or an in-kind contribution) to an enterprise, conferring an economic advantage that is not available on market terms.
3. affects international trade.

For awards made from 4 January 2023, the majority are subject to Subsidy Control Act 2022. EU State aid rules now only apply in certain limited circumstances.

Financial viability and eligibility
Innovate UK is unable to award funding to organisations that are considered to be in financial difficulty. All applicant organisations are subjected to financial viability and eligibility checks to ensure they are suitable for public funding.

General guidance on Subsidy control (and State aid where relevant).

Article 10 of the Windsor Framework

The EU and the UK formally adopted the Windsor Framework on 24 March 2023.

The Windsor Framework replaces the Northern Ireland Protocol, providing a new legal and UK constitutional framework.

Article 10 provides that European Union State aid rules will continue to apply to the UK in respect of measures which affect trade in goods or the electricity market between Northern Ireland and the EU.

Article 10 does not directly apply to subsidies for services and such subsidies will need to comply with the UK's subsidy control regime.

Undertakings in difficulty
In the unusual circumstance of an award having to be made under the EU GBER regulation (State aid), the applicant must pass **'undertaking in difficulty' checks as defined by GBER (2014)**.

Guidance on Article 10 of the Windsor Framework.

Research, Development and Innovation Streamlined Subsidy Scheme

- Designed by Government to award subsidies to enterprises if they met defined criteria contained within the [Scheme](#)

- 3 categories available please check the competition you are applying for applicable categories
  - **Feasibility Studies**
  - **Industrial Research** and Experimental Development
  - Small and Medium Sized Enterprise (SME) Research, Development and Innovation Support

- When submitting an application as part of our due diligence you will be asked to declare any previous awards made in the 'applicable period' to ensure limits are not breached.
  - The applicable period is made up of:
  - (a) the elapsed part of the current financial year
  - (b) the two financial years immediately preceding the current financial year

Category 1: Feasibility Studies

For feasibility studies projects, you could get funding for your eligible project costs of:

- up to 70% if you are a micro or small organisation
- up to 60% if you are a medium-sized organisation
- up to 50% if you are a large organisation

Eligible costs please refer to the competition to which you are applying.

For a detailed definition of feasibility studies see guidance document section 13.1.

Category 2: Industrial Research Projects

For Industrial Research projects, you could get funding for your eligible project costs of:

- up to 70% if you are a micro or small organisation

- up to 60% if you are a medium-sized organisation

- up to 50% if you are a large organisation

Eligible costs please refer to the competition to which you are applying.

For a detailed definition of these research categories see guidance document section 14.3.

Assessment

Assessment

[YouTube Playlist](#)

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Project setup

If you pass the technical assessment, you will have a further eight steps detailed in your notification to complete in Project Setup before being able to start your project.

These are:
- Project details
- Project team
- Documents
- You will be allocated a Monitoring Service Provider (MSP)
- Bank details
- Finance checks
- Spend profile
- Grant Offer Letter

Please share the T&Cs with your legal team at the earliest possible opportunity to avoid any delays.

You are expected to complete all the steps above within **90 calendar** days of receiving your notification. Failure to do so may result in funding being withdrawn.

Work can only commence on your project once you have received your Go Live email.

Additional Support

Innovate UK Business Growth

…understands that innovation-focused businesses face obstacles to growth beyond those facing typical entrepreneurial companies. Common stumbling blocks include:
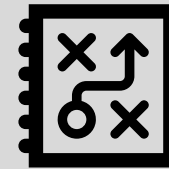
Inherent risks

Managing technical risks e.g. new science, longer time to revenue, investor caution, regulatory approval, negotiating with partners and defending intellectual property
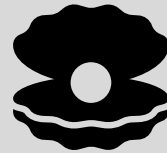
Inaccessible resources

Knowing where to find and how to access the right innovation resources and opportunities in a fragmented and confusing landscape

Incomplete skillsets

Having the right combination of business and product development expertise to achieve important milestones

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Innovate UK Business Growth's high-quality advisory support helps innovation-focused businesses in all UK locations and sectors to overcome these challenges and seize opportunities.

It offers clients a comprehensive spectrum of innovation and commercial expertise from a dedicated specialist located nearby

It offers a single access point to the most significant regional, national and international innovation resources

The 1:1 support is flexible, tailored in focus and timescale to the individual needs of innovative businesses

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Contact Us

Whether you need help to set a strategic direction or with progressing your innovation, financing your growth or unlocking the potential of international partnerships.

visit our website:
www.iukbg.ukri.org

or call us on:
0300 123 3066

Contact Business Growth

The preferred way to get in touch with us is via email using the form below – we aim to reply within 2 working days. However, we will also be available by telephone during working hours (9am-5pm) and an answerphone will be available at all other times or when our lines are engaged (we will return your call as soon as possible). Please note that you cannot access our colleagues at Innovate UK through these channels.

If you're not from the UK, please contact your local EEN branch.

You can also refer to our FAQs page to find answers to frequently asked questions about our services.

Telephone | 0300 123 3066

Name

Email

Telephone

Company name

Registered company name or intended trading name

Note: The service is offered to all Innovate UK competition winners but any suitable ambitious innovation-focused businesses with under 250 employees can be supported

Useful Information

- UKRI's General Guidance
- Innovate UK Business Connect's Good Application Guide
- Who we fund
- Collaboration Agreement Guidance: Lambert Toolkit
- Innovate UK: Shaping the Future

Funding opportunities

To find out more about the competitions currently available you can visit either the **Innovation Funding Service (IFS)** or the **funding finder** on the UKRI website. Through these links, you can review the competitions available and decide which ones may be right for you.

You can **sign up to our newsletter** to receive all the latest information on our competitions straight to your inbox or **register for email alerts** to get page updates from Innovate UK.

The government also offers **other opportunities for businesses to get finance and support**.
Innovate UK reserves the rights to host competitions on a needs basis and will adjust each competition criteria and scope accordingly. We may occasionally run closed competitions that are for invited applicants only. These are run based on the challenge requirement or need.
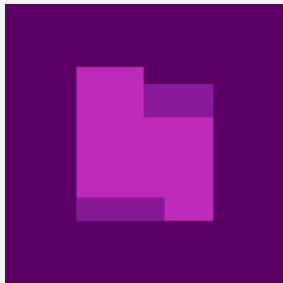
Contact

Customer Support Services

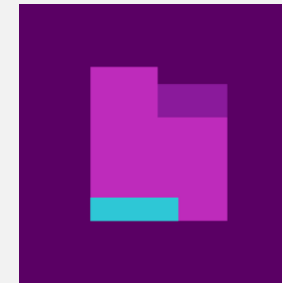0300 321 4357 (Monday - Friday 9am-12pm and 2pm-5pm)

support@iuk.ukri.org

Innovate UK
ukri.org/councils/innovate-uk

Innovate UK Business Connect
www.iuk-business-connect.org.uk

Innovate UK Business Growth
www.iukbg.ukri.org