

Women in Innovation 2025/26

Live Q&A

Thursday 8 January 2026



WOMEN IN INNOVATION

Going beyond boundaries

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Webinar Etiquette



Many of your questions may be covered in the webinar – please hold questions until the topic is covered, then ask if still not answered.



Attendees have been asked to submit questions in advance, these will not be addressed individually but we will do our best to cover all areas.



All project specific questions need to go to Innovate UK Customer Support Service (CSS)

Customer Support Service

If you need further support or have questions about your application, you can contact Innovate UK Customer Support Services:

 **0300 321 4357** (*Monday to Friday, 9am–12pm and 2pm–5pm*)

 support@iuk.ukri.org

They'll be able to provide additional guidance or help with any queries you may have.

Agenda

1. Business stage
2. Starting to form a team
3. Founder or Co-Founder
4. Innovation – within scope
5. Investment Challenges
6. Companies House
7. Training & Development
8. Miscellaneous questions



Emily Nott

Head of Inclusive Innovation
Programmes
Innovate UK



Transparency & Fairness in Decision Making



Find out more - [click here](#)



Lucie Kanaa

Programme Manager, Inclusive
Innovation
Innovate UK



Women in Innovation 2025/26: Purpose & Focus

What the programme aims to achieve:

- Create more opportunities for women founders and co-founders to access finance to grow and scale their businesses
- Boost investment into women-led businesses in the UK
- Provide the conditions, support, and visibility to help women innovators succeed
- Recognise the contribution women innovators make to UK economic growth and social impact

What the Awards offer:

- Up to 60 awards, each with up to £75,000 + 12 months of bespoke business support
- Additional bespoke support for highly commended applicants



Who the awards are for: Scope, Business Stage & Innovation

Scope (must align to):

- Advanced Manufacturing
- Digital & Technologies
- Life Sciences

Business Stage (Late Stage Start-Up):

- Have a Minimal Viable Product
- Received early interest from users
- Understanding of realistic market opportunity
- Started forming a team beyond founders

Innovation:

Your business must be developing a new or significantly improved product, service, or business model that addresses a specific market need. Your solution must be one of the following:

- new to the market, for example, not currently available
- a significant improvement over existing solutions in terms of performance, efficiency, accessibility, cost or impact



Eligibility & Support Package

Eligibility:

- Woman founder/co-founder of a UK-registered SME
- Single applicant, UK resident
- 12-month project (1 Jul 2026 to 30 Jun 2027)
- Up to £75k grant request
- Not previously funded by: WII, Young Innovators Next Steps, Innovate UK Award - Build

Includes:

- 10+ hrs training & development
- Innovation Growth Specialist coaching
- Investment readiness support
- Press & media training
- Mentoring + 4 hrs role-modelling
- Access to networks via Innovate UK Business Connect



Question Topic 1 – Business stage

To align with the scope of this competition, your business **must** be a **late stage start-up with ambitions to grow a scalable business which will involve raising considerable investment in the next 12 to 24 months.**

As a late stage start-up we would expect you to:

- have built a basic version of the idea or product, service, solution, for example a prototype or Minimal Viable Product
- have received early interest from users, customers, or made some money
- know who the product is for and have started testing how the business will work
- have an understanding of realistic market opportunity
- have started forming a team, going beyond original founders

Question Topic 1 – Business stage

Submitted questions include:

1. “How much traction do I need to demonstrate?”
2. “What level of technical demonstration is expected for early stage start-ups — conceptual outputs, simulated results, or a working MVP?”
3. “I’d really like to apply, but I currently have no revenue and no MVP of our new product pathway yet. Is this enough to be considered late-stage?”

Question Topic 2 – Starting to form a team

We understand business owners face financial challenges when starting to form a team but we are aiming this competition at women innovators 'who have a late stage start-up with ambitions to grow a scalable business which will involve raising considerable investment in the next 12 to 24 months' therefore we would have expected you to 'have started forming a team, going beyond original founders'.

If you have not been able to achieve this by the time you submit an application, then you will not have fulfilled this aspect of suitability and scope.

- Working with freelancers / consultants / contracted specialists / an Advisory Board, while valuable, wouldn't be considered as forming a team for this purpose.
- We would expect an applicant's business to have employees on PAYE at the time of submission.

New slide: added since webinar

Question Topic 2 – Starting to form a team

Clarification on ‘forming a team’ and PAYE

During the Q&A webinar, there was some confusion around whether it is an eligibility requirement for applicants to have employees on PAYE. We would like to clarify our position.

The Women in Innovation Awards [competition scope](#) is aimed at women founders and cofounders with a *“late-stage startup with ambitions to grow a scalable business which will involve raising considerable investment in the next 12 to 24 months”*, who have *“started forming a team, going beyond original founders”*.

Having employees on PAYE at the point of submission would strengthen this aspect of suitability and scope. This is **not an eligibility criterion**, nor is the absence of PAYE employees a standalone reason for rejection.

Although there are different ways to demonstrate that a team is being formed, it should be noted that reliance solely on free lancers, consultants, or advisory boards, while valuable, may not be considered as ***“started forming a team”*** for this purpose.

These expectations reflect our experience of what investors look for and all Award holders receive bespoke investment support and connections to help accelerate growth and secure funding.

Further information can be found in the [business stage support video](#).

Question Topic 2 – Starting to form a team

Submitted questions include:

1. “The application criteria refer to having access to an appropriate team. Can this requirement be met through fractional team members or specialist external consultants, or must team members be directly employed on PAYE?”
2. “What does ‘started forming a team’ mean in practice?”
3. “PAYE Requirement: If we don’t currently have PAYE but plan to put it in place before the project starts, is that acceptable?”

Question Topic 3 – Founder or Co-Founder

Why?

The decision to focus on asking women founders or co-founders to apply for the Women in Innovation Awards 2025/26 was based on the fact the scope and eligibility for the Women in Innovation competition 2024/25 was considered too broad and as a result the competition was heavily over-subscribed meaning a 3.4% success rate for applicants.

Through engaging with our community via a series of roundtables at the end of 2024, we heard clearly that refining eligibility, scope and suitability would help us deliver more impactful Awards which is outlined in the [Advancing women-led innovation: Pledge for Progress](#).

Evidence

We don't require evidence in your application to confirm founder or co-founder status. Applicants have to answer the question: *Are you a woman founder or co-founder of your business?* If an applicant selects "Yes," we accept this as evidence they are the founder or co-founder. If successful, during project set up, the applicant's business will be subject to due diligence checks.

Definition of founder / co-founder

As a founder or co-founder we would expect you to have played a lead role in creating and running this business. We would expect an applicant to be recognised publicly as being founder or co-founder of the business.

Question Topic 3 – Founder or Co-Founder

Submitted questions include:

1. “How strict is the definition of ‘founder’ for the purpose of this competition?”
2. “As only one woman from the organisation can apply, how should we choose between two co-founders? Will the assessment consider personal suitability as well as the project?”
3. “If the co-founder applies but plans to work abroad during the project, does she need to remain UK-based?”

Question Topic 4 - Innovation – within scope

For information about scope of the competition, please look at content under the [Scope tab](#).

Your business innovation needs to align with one of the three growth sectors – Advanced Manufacturing, Digital and Technologies and Life Sciences.

- To understand whether your innovation is within scope, please look at the priority areas under each of these growth sectors (found under the [Scope tab](#)) to ensure your innovation is aligned.
- For example, to align with AI – you would need to demonstrate your innovation is ‘*supporting the development of foundation models and applied AI across sectors including health, finance, and manufacturing*’.
- We recommend looking at the sector plan for your respective growth sector.

An applicant is an expert in their innovation and therefore needs to make the decision whether they are within scope with the information provided in the [competition brief](#).

Question Topic 4 - Innovation – within scope

Submitted questions include:

1. “I'm unsure whether I meet the scope of the competition. My product is centred in digital and technology, but I'm not sure it fits the priority areas — how can I tell if I'm in scope?”
2. “Can the idea be an application of existing technology to a new problem, or must the underlying technology itself be new?”
3. “How does Innovate UK assess innovations that sit between Digital & Technologies and another sector, such as Creative Industries or Health?”

Question topic 5 – Investment Challenges

We completely understand the challenges around seeking investment and how some business owners will focus on bootstrapping. This year, however, the Women in Innovation Awards 2025/26 are designed for women innovators *who have a late-stage start-up with ambitions to grow a scalable business, which will involve raising considerable investment in the next 12–24 months.*

As part of these Awards, award holders will receive *tailored business support and coaching from a dedicated Innovation Growth Specialist at Innovate UK Business Growth*, along with *bespoke investment support and connections to help accelerate growth and secure funding.*

- We would expect award holders to actively engage with this support to pursue investment as part of their scaling journey.
- If you feel that seeking investment isn't the right path for your business at this time, then these Awards will not be the best fit for your current plans.

Question topic 5 – Investment Challenges

Submitted questions include:

1. “As a late-stage startup aiming for significant investment in the next 12–24 months, what specific types of support does the bespoke business package provide to help attract investors?”
2. “If we don’t feel ready to seek investment in the next 12–24 months, does that mean these Awards aren’t the right fit?”
3. “Are companies with larger growth potential prioritised over those with smaller but still important impact?”

Question topic 6 – Companies House

In order to be eligible, the business needs to be listed on Companies House by the time you submit an application. We do not state that it has to be listed for a specific period of time.



Companies House

Question topic 6 – Companies House

Submitted questions include:

1. “Does my business need to have been registered on Companies House for a minimum amount of time before I apply?”
2. “If my company is newly registered on Companies House, am I still eligible, even if operations have only recently started?”
3. “Does the Companies House registration need to reflect specific SIC codes to be eligible?”

Question topic 7 – Training & Development

As outlined under the Eligibility tab, a Women in Innovation 2025/26 award will start on the 1 July 2026 and end on the 30 June 2027.

An award holder therefore must engage in a minimum of 10 hours of training and development, and commit to a minimum of four hours of role-modelling activity, over the course of the 12 months of this award.

Award holders will be asked to attend what they can according to their training and development requirements and schedules.

The only requirement is that an award holder engages with a minimum of 10 hours of training and development over the course of the 12 months of their award.

Question topic 7 – Training & Development

Submitted questions include:

1. “Should you be successful in your grant application, is there also the option to offer mentorship support to female employees in your business?”
2. “What counts towards the required 10 hours of training and development during the award year?”
3. “Do award holders have to attend all training sessions, or can they choose based on their needs?”

Miscellaneous questions

Submitted questions include:

1. “What can the £75,000 be spent on? Can it fund R&D undertaken in the UK?”
2. “How much of the grant can I allocate to ... versus development?”
3. “Can/should the Pichtape video include slides or visuals, or must it be purely talking to camera?”



<https://nolimits.ukri.org/women-in-innovation>



Connecting Women to new opportunities in innovation



Innovate
UK

Available Support

- We welcome and encourage applications from people of all backgrounds and are committed to making our application process accessible to everyone.
- This includes providing support for people who have a disability or long-term condition and face barriers applying to us.



Reasonable Adjustment Support

The reasonable adjustment service can offer **1-2-1 Support** with areas such as:



Planning and Organisation



Proofreading



Interpreting the Application



Time Management

The [RAPs] are very patient and knowledgeable and are **a great reflection of the organisation.**

[They] have made the application process human and less intimidating.

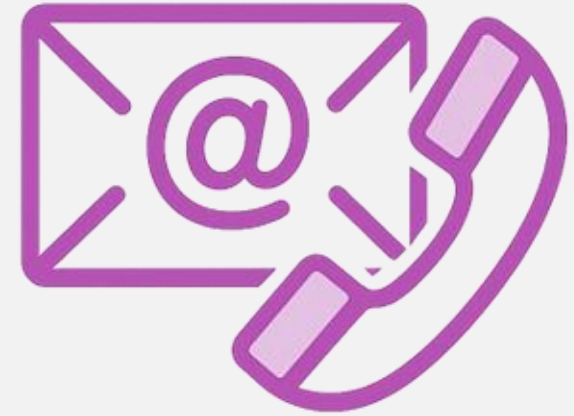
This was the best support I have ever received from an institution for my neurodevelopmental disability.

I would never have been able to complete this form without the support.

- **87%** very/moderately likely to recommend the RA service to others
- **86%** rated the support they received as 'Good' or 'Excellent'

Contact Us for Support

If you would like any support, please contact our Customer Support Service Team on support@iuk.ukri.org or at **0300 321 4357**



Please get in touch as early as you can, so that there is plenty of time to arrange this support.

Suitability Checker

To ensure you align with the scope of this competition, we recommend you complete the suitability checker.

Link - [Women in Innovation Suitability Checker – Innovate UK Business Connect](#)




Scan to access the
Suitability Checker

Timeline Reminder

26 November 2025 - Competition opens

- Briefing – [watch the recording](#)
- Question Set – [watch the recording](#)
- Business Stage – [watch the recording](#)




All support session videos are linked here and can also be found on the [IFS website](#), under the 'Dates' tab.

8 January 2026 - Live Q&A Session

4 February 2026 - 11:00am Competition closes

1 May 2026 - Applicants notified

1 July 2026 - Project start



DO NOT leave your submission until the last minute. We recommend submitting at least 24 hours prior to the deadline.

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Thank You



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