

# CLUSTER ACCELERATION PROGRAMME

Programme Roadmap and  
Application Guidance Notes



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# Chapter 1 - Why Collaborate?

## Benefits of business collaboration

Working collaboratively can help you to improve your business competitiveness, become more innovative, enhance staff skills and win new business.

Businesses who work collaboratively will frequently engage in information-sharing and work together on cost-reduction measures to maximise their profitability and increase opportunities. They will often collaborate on commercial ventures such as the development of new products or entry into new markets.

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### A business may work collaboratively to achieve a number of key business benefits:

- Financial benefits - the financial benefits of being part of a network can include an increase in domestic or export sales, submitting a joint tender to win larger contracts or a reduction in costs by sharing resources
- People - the benefits to staff can include developing employees' skills and abilities, safeguarding jobs, increasing employment and encouraging staff motivation
- Physical capital - the benefits of being part of a network can have an impact on the physical capital of the business by supporting the sharing of facilities, equipment and raw materials
- Intellectual capital - the intellectual capital of a business can benefit through information-sharing, engagement in collaborative research, development, and design activities. They may avail of other companies' complementary strengths, capabilities and also share best practice
- Develop new processes - joining a network can support a business to develop new or innovative products, processes or services. It may help increase company knowledge of a marketplace to help them identify potential new customers and allow them to compete more effectively.

Working collaboratively may provide member companies with access to resources that would otherwise be beyond the scope of a single business. Individual businesses can face a number of limitations when trying to compete in global markets. This may include scale and expertise.

Through collaboration, businesses can often complement each other and specialise in different areas to compete in markets usually beyond their individual reach.

### How can the Cluster Acceleration Programme help?

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The Cluster Acceleration Programme provides funding to SMEs who want to collectively work together to exploit opportunities arising from new products, services or ways of working.

### Programme Details

The Cluster Acceleration Programme aims to increase the competitiveness of NI based SMEs initially through the establishment of collaborative networks who will carry out feasibility studies on particular projects or commercial opportunities. The formation of Clusters will then be derived from the outcome of successful feasibility studies.

The programme provides support for projects aligned to the 7 priority sectors identified by the Department for the Economy: [Defining priority sectors/clusters | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

The Programme support operates on two levels:

#### Phase one: Cluster Feasibility Study

Phase One offers up to £60,000 at 100% grant rate for SME-led networks consisting of a minimum of 8-10 SMEs, to scope out innovative collaborative projects with the potential to increase business competitiveness.

#### Phase two: Cluster Project

Phase Two offers up to £1,000,000 per annum, at 100% grant rate (for a maximum period of 5 years) for up to 5 Clusters emerging from the feasibility studies scoped at Phase One. There must be a minimum of 20 member organisations within the Cluster, including businesses, entrepreneurs, stakeholders from academia and government.

For more information on the Programme please visit the FAQs in the Cluster Acceleration Programme Toolkit.

#### What is a Network?

A Network comprises an informal group of businesses and stakeholders working collaboratively to take advantage of emerging opportunities and/or solve common problems. It is the embryonic foundation for a potential Cluster.

#### What is a Cluster Feasibility Study?

The Cluster Acceleration Programme provides funding to enable Networks of SMEs and stakeholders to carry out a **Feasibility Study** to assess the feasibility of a particular project/commercial opportunity. This Scoping Phase typically takes up to 24 months, although it is possible to complete a project in a shorter timeframe.

A Feasibility Study is not a Technical Report (although it may address the technical feasibility of any proposed solution), nor is it a business plan – rather it seeks to bring together a ‘big picture’ view of all the building blocks of a new venture. It allows participants to investigate the viability of the project, quantify the size, scale and value of the opportunity, identify priorities and risks, and devise a route map to take the project forward.

When considering a collaborative project, the Feasibility Study also provides an opportunity for individual members to assess whether or not they can work together, and if so, what the ground rules for engagement should be.

**Below are some of the key benefits of carrying out a Cluster Feasibility Study:**

- Defines the scope, scale and value of an opportunity
- Improves focus by defining priorities and/or establishing options
- Provides an evidence base for future investment and/or funding
- Identifies risks and associated mitigations
- Scope out business model options
- Allows for the development of Terms of Reference or appropriate Rules of Engagement

To be eligible for funding a Network must consist of a minimum of 8 Northern Ireland SMEs, one of which **must be an Invest NI customer** and be willing to sign and take the Letter of Offer on behalf of the Network.

The remaining members of a Network may include representatives of large companies, and other stakeholders such as academic institutions and public sector organisations, as appropriate. These additional organisations do not necessarily need to be based in Northern Ireland.

The grant provided must be used principally to engage the services of an independent facilitator who will manage the project in conjunction with the members of the Network.

Please note, it is also possible to make an application on behalf of a Network consisting predominantly (or led by) ‘large’ companies, however in this instance the maximum rate of funding will be reduced to 50%.

Further guidance on the content of a Feasibility Study can be found in the guidance notes.

### **What is a Cluster?**

The Cluster Acceleration Programme adopts the ‘Super Cluster’ model which is defined as combining industry, government and academia, capital investors, venture capitalists and entrepreneurs that are linked by their economic activities (related sectors, value chains, markets, technologies etc).

The Cluster may form through multiple collaborative Networks, including the merging of Networks actively participating in Phase One that provide critical mass and economies of scale to tackle challenges and opportunities relevant to the Cluster members.

Clusters must draw members from across NI, including rural and urban areas.

Through Phase two funding, Cluster managers are employed by the Clusters in order to administer and manage the relationship between member organisations and stakeholders. Cluster managers are also responsible for providing monitoring data to Invest NI.

### **What is a Cluster project?**

If a compelling evidence base has been gathered as part of a Cluster Feasibility Study, it may be possible to secure funding for a Cluster Project. The decision to provide this funding will be solely at the discretion of Invest NI.

As with Phase One Cluster Feasibility Studies projects, the funding provided by Invest NI is intended to be used to engage the services of an independent facilitator (Cluster Manager) to carry out a project typically lasting for up to 5 years.

Phase Two projects will require a detailed SMART (Specific; Measurable; Activity-based; Realistic; Time-bound) objectives project plan, a risk register, a detailed budget and evidence of robust governance processes.

More information on making an application for Phase Two Cluster funding can be found in the guidance notes.

Please note, it is also possible to make an application on behalf of a Cluster consisting predominantly (or led by) 'large' companies, however in this instance the maximum rate of funding will be reduced to 50%.

## **Chapter 2 - Putting your project together**

### **Start the conversation**

If you are an existing Invest NI customer you are required to discuss the proposed project with your Client Executive.

Applications to the Programme are normally accepted in defined call periods, which take place at least once a year. However, we understand that it often takes time to independently engage with the relevant partners and stakeholders in the formation of a Network/Cluster, therefore we welcome enquiries from eligible SMEs at any time.

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## How to set SMART Objectives?

Each project funded under The Cluster Acceleration Programme is required to have a set of SMART Objectives along with the application form. These will form the basis of the project and will inform all subsequent project activities. Each objective should demonstrate the following characteristics:

### Specific:

Your objective should be clear and specific, otherwise it will be difficult to achieve. When drafting the objective try to answer the four 'W' questions:

- What do I want to accomplish?
- Why is this goal important?
- Who is involved?
- Which resources or risks are involved?

### Measurable:

It is important to have measurable goals so that you can track your progress and stay motivated.

**A measurable goal should address questions such as:**

- How much?
- How many?
- How regularly?
- How will I know when it's accomplished?

### Activity-based:

Your objectives need to be realistic and activity based in order to be successful. In other words you need to identify clear tasks that once undertaken will help you deliver against your objective/s. An activity based objective will answer questions such as:

- What steps/tasks do we need to undertake to accomplish this goal?
- How realistic are these tasks based on other constraints, such as finance, resources, timing, regulatory, technical and operational limits?

### Realistic:

This step is about ensuring that your objective matters to the Network and that it also aligns with other relevant objectives:

- Is the proposed objective worthwhile?
- Do we have control over achieving the objective?
- Does it match with our other efforts/needs?

### Time-bound:

Every goal needs a target date so that you have a deadline to focus on and something to work towards. This part of the SMART objective criteria will help the Network ensure that the project tasks are allocated sufficient time/resources to ensure they are addressed in an effective manner.

You can find out more about setting SMART objectives in the Application Guidance Notes in Chapter 9 of this document.

### **How to identify other members**

Think about the project and the skills you need to enable you to deliver against the project. What other SMEs are there that you might be able to work with? Can you approach them? Can you work with them?

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### **How to identify project stakeholders**

To ensure that your collaborative project creates the right conditions for success you will need to think about engaging with any stakeholders who are relevant to the project.

According to the Project Management Institute (PMI), the term **project stakeholder** refers to ‘an individual, Network, or organization, who may affect, be affected by, or perceive itself to be affected by a decision, activity, or outcome of a project’ (Project Management Institute, 2013).

These stakeholders may have an interest in, or stand to gain from the successful completion of a project; or may be in a position to exert a positive (or negative) influence on elements of the project.

In the context of The Cluster Acceleration Programme project stakeholders may include regulators, larger companies, public sector organisations etc. Government Departments, Local Councils, trade bodies etc. entrepreneurs, start-ups.

### **How to identify a Lead Partner?**

The company that signs and holds the Letter of Offer on behalf of the collective becomes the Lead Partner. They must have an established relationship with Invest NI through their existing Client Executive, and will be responsible for paying the facilitator and subsequently submitting the retrospective grant claims to Invest NI.

### **How to identify project risks**

In order to minimise potential barriers to the success of your project you should seek to identify possible risks and consider what steps you can take to mitigate against these. Risks can fall into a number of categories – operational, financial, regulatory etc. You will find more information on how to generate a project Risk Register in the Application Guidance Notes in Chapter 9 of this document.

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## Completing an Application Form

The Cluster Acceleration Programme Application Form (including SMART Objectives and Risk Register) should be filled out by the Network/Cluster and submitted by the Lead Partner on behalf of the entire collective. **Please ensure that all the members read the application form before it is submitted.**

The Cluster Acceleration Programme Team at Invest NI can give you advice on filling out your application, but cannot complete it on your behalf. We cannot consider funding a project unless an application form has been completed. You can find out more about how to complete an application form in Chapter 9 of this document.

## How your application will be assessed?

When assessing an application for The Cluster Acceleration Programme funding the team at Invest NI will generally consider the following factors:

- Does the project address an opportunity that is genuinely innovative (as opposed to business-as-usual)?
- Does the project align with NI's economic vision of addressing regional balance, productivity, net zero and good jobs?
- Do the proposed participants have the right mix of skills and experience?
- Have the right stakeholders been identified and approached to play a role in the project?
- Does the application contain evidence that the Network Members have fully identified a series of SMART objectives and the tasks/activities needed to address these?
- Do the participants consist of at least 8 Northern Ireland SMEs for Phase one Cluster feasibility studies, and 20 for Phase two Cluster projects??
- Is the Lead Company an Invest NI customer?
- Do the project costs represent Value for Money?
- Have risks to the project been identified and mitigated against?

# Chapter 3 - Starting your project

## What is a facilitator/Cluster Manager?

The funding provided by the Invest NI Cluster Acceleration Programme is designed to be used to secure the services of an independent Facilitator (Cluster Manager for Phase two projects), who will work with the members to deliver against the project objectives.

The individual will enable Networks and/or Clusters to work more effectively; to collaborate and achieve synergy. The Facilitator/ Cluster manager is a 'neutral' party who, by **not** taking sides or expressing a point of view during the project, can advocate for fair, open and inclusive procedures to deliver the Network's project.

**A good Facilitator will display the following characteristics/skills:**

- Ability to stimulate interaction and collaboration
- Creates a safe environment for the group to share and build trust
- Good listener
- Provides a structure for discussion and exploration of new opportunities
- Encourages all participants to contribute
- Uses open questions to stimulate new possibilities and/or ways of thinking
- Is neutral and responsive, rather than reactive
- Can synthesise often competing views
- Challenges (respectfully) patterns of behaviour/thinking
- Is conscious of project timeframes and can work within deadlines/reporting structures
- Appreciates the importance of good project governance
- Displays empathy and emotional intelligence
- Has good communication skills, both written and oral

**A Facilitator/Cluster Manager will generally carry out the following tasks:**

- actively involve all members of the Network in decision making
- ensure that the project objectives are met in a timely fashion
- maximise individuals' commitment and engagement
- build a team spirit that lasts
- scan the horizon for new opportunities
- achieve consensus by challenging assumptions
- articulate a shared vision
- take responsibility for project administration, including collecting timesheets, assist in preparing claims, and draft a final report and recommendations

**How do I find a Facilitator/Cluster Manager?**

Invest NI maintains a database of experienced service providers, including those who identify as facilitators.

Although those on the list are not endorsed, vetted or approved by ourselves, we can filter the database by sectoral and functional knowledge and provide you with a list of names, contact details, linkedin profiles and websites of those who may be suitable for the role you are seeking to fill.

Please note that you are not obliged to choose a Facilitator from this list. Please ask your Cluster Acceleration Programme Executive for more details on how to access the database.

**What is the appointment process for a facilitator/Cluster Manager?**

The Network or Cluster is responsible for sourcing and appointing a suitable candidate. As this is the key role within the project we recommend that for Phase One Cluster feasibility studies a minimum of three quotes are obtained from potential candidates.

These quotes should consist of a tender document detailing the proposed project methodology, along with a pricing structure and evidence of previous (relevant) experience. The quotations should be followed up with an interview to ensure that the candidate is a good 'fit' for both the project and its participants.

For Phase Two Cluster projects we recommend that you advertise the post in line with best practice recruitment processes.

### **What is a Letter of Offer? (LoO)**

For Phase one Cluster Feasibility Studies the Letter of Offer forms the contract between the Network (via the Lead Company) and Invest NI;

For Phase two Cluster projects the Letter of Offer forms the contract between the Cluster and Invest NI;

Both contain all the obligations relating to the project, as well as the specific objectives relating to the project.

### **What is the Letter of Adherence (LoA)**

The Letter of Adherence is sent to all the SME project members (aside from the Lead Company). It advises the project members of the programme rules and regulations, and their obligations under the scheme and must be signed by each participating company, and returned to Invest NI.

It also informs participating SMEs that for the purposes of State Aid the grant is deemed to have been shared across all the Network and Cluster member companies (see below for more information on State Aid).

### **What do you need to know about State Aid?**

The assistance provided under The Cluster Acceleration Programme represents State Aid under Commission Regulation EU 651/2014, 17 June 2014 (the General Block Exemption Regulation - GBER), specifically Article 28: Innovation Aid for SMEs. The Programme is not De Minimus Aid.

No single undertaking may receive in excess of EUR 200,000 of innovation aid (or STG £170,000) in any 3 year period. For the avoidance of doubt, only grant aid awarded under Article 28 notified schemes offering 100% aid intensity are deemed to count towards the STG £170,000 cumulative cap.

The Programme operates on the basis of the Lead Company receiving and holding any and all financial assistance provided to the project on trust for all the members.

Therefore (and only for the administrative purpose of calculating levels of GBER aid allocated to any one undertaking under 100% funded Article 28 schemes) each Network/Cluster member shall

be deemed to have benefited to an amount equal to an equal share of any, and all, financial assistance provided by Invest NI pursuant to the Letter of Offer in question.

**It is important that you understand the State Aid implications of participating in The Cluster Acceleration Programme. If you have any further questions please contact your allocated Cluster Acceleration Programme Executive.**

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### **What do you need to know about the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)?**

All participating members fall under the requirements of GDPR, however to enable delivery of the Cluster Acceleration Programme we may share your contact information with other businesses, public sector organisations and academic institutions as appropriate, within the context of encouraging networking, access to new economic opportunities and/or knowledge transfer.

For details on how we use your personal data, including your rights, please visit: [www.investni.com/privacy](http://www.investni.com/privacy)

### **What is a kick-off meeting?**

Once you have signed and returned your Letter of Offer, and appointed a Facilitator or Cluster Manager, we will ask you to set up a kick-off meeting to enable all members of the project team, and your allocated Invest NI Programme Executive, to meet and officially start the project.

At this time Invest NI will provide an overview of the general commitments, reporting structures and financial processes associated with the project. This is an opportunity to ask any questions and ensure that everyone is aware of what will be expected from this as a result of participating in The Cluster Acceleration Programme project.

It also allows for a 'sense check' to be carried out to establish that all participants are still committed to the project and to confirm if the project objectives remain relevant (eg. a change in market conditions between the application phase and the start of the project may necessitate an amendment to the objectives). The Letters of Adherence from Network members are to be returned to Invest NI at this point.

Please note that if you do wish to change any of your project objectives once a Letter of Offer has been issued you will need to discuss this with, and obtain approval from, your allocated Cluster Acceleration Programme Executive.

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## Chapter 4 - Managing your project

### Methodology

When carrying out your project you should seek to use a number of tools to help you identify opportunities, solve problems and reach consensus. Providing evidence of the outcome of using these tools will help strengthen your final report and provide a robust set of recommendations. An experienced facilitator or Cluster Manager will be familiar with the following activities and will seek to make use of them throughout the project:

- Business Model Canvas <https://strategyzer.com/canvas/business-model-canvas>
- SWOT Analysis <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/swot-analysis-example>
- Benchmarking <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/benchmark-your-business-performance>

### Governance

It is good practice when establishing a collaborative project to agree a Terms of Reference (ToR) at the start of the project.

Terms of reference define the purpose and structures of a project, committee, meeting, negotiation or any similar collection of people who have agreed to work together to accomplish a shared goal.

Terms of reference show how the Network in question will be defined, developed, and verified. They should also provide a documented basis for making future decisions and for confirming or developing a common understanding of the scope among Network members. Creating detailed terms of reference is critical as they define the:

- vision, objectives, scope and deliverables (i.e. what has to be achieved)
- stakeholder roles and responsibilities (i.e. who will take part in it)
- resource, financial and quality plans (i.e. how it will be achieved)
- work breakdown structure and schedule (i.e. when it will be achieved)

### Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs)

A Non-Disclosure Agreement is a contract by which one or more parties agree not to disclose confidential information that they have shared with each other as a necessary part of doing business together. You might consider having one as part of your collaboration.

You can find out more about Non Disclosure Agreements here:

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/types-non-disclosure-agreements>

## Consortium Agreements

As an alternative to a Terms of Reference agreement you may prefer to have a Consortium Agreement; you can find out more about Consortium Agreements here:

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/sites/default/files/Joint-venture-agreements-template.pdf>

## Finance

The Lead Company is responsible for paying invoices submitted by the facilitator throughout the project and subsequently claiming the costs back from Invest NI. The claims for costs can be submitted at regular intervals throughout the project to facilitate cash flow, via a claim form.

Claim guidance notes are available here: <https://secure.investni.com/static/library/invest-ni/documents/claim-pack-guidance-notes.pdf>

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## How to build Trust within a collaborative working relationship?

Successful collaboration is built as much on trust as on the viability of the project itself. Many organisations, with individual interests and goals, brought together for a common purpose can lead to tension. Ensuring that members work honestly and build trust is a priority.

The simplest way to achieve trust is establishing effective channels of communication between Network members. This could be through scheduled meetings at regular intervals, or identifying clear roles for individuals in project changes or challenges. It is vitally important that the Network ensures that each member follows procedures and protocols. These should be clearly communicated to all members. **Timesheets**

All participating members are required to complete monthly timesheets when participating in a project. These should be collated by the Facilitator/Cluster Manager and submitted to Invest NI on request (typically to accompany claims). The purpose of the timesheet is to demonstrate that members have been engaged in genuine collaboration.

## Chapter 5 - Raising your profile

Once your collaborative project is underway you should give some consideration as to a communications strategy.

Ensure that you maintain ongoing contact with The Cluster Acceleration Programme Executive who is allocated to your project. Make him/her aware of any achievements or impacts experienced by the companies as a result of participating in the project, as it may be possible to arrange additional PR via internal and external Invest NI channels.

Those participating in Phase One projects will be required to (in addition to fulfilling quarterly monitoring requirements) provide regular verbal and written updates on the projects, as and when requested by the relevant Programme Executive.

If you are taking part in a Phase Two Cluster project (in addition to fulfilling project monitoring requirements) you will be asked to make a formal quarterly update presentation to the relevant Invest NI team members – this is your chance to raise awareness of the good work being undertaken by the Cluster, and also provides an opportunity to establish relationships with other members of the Invest NI team who may be able to assist you and/or provide signposting to other sources of support .

Make use of social media channels, as appropriate, to promote your work (**please note that if you are intending to embark on any major PR initiatives you must first clear any messaging via the Invest NI Corporate Communications team**).

You can find out about the various social media channels here <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/social-media-platforms>

## Chapter 6 - Other support available

This section focuses primarily on other support available from Invest NI (organisations such as InterTradeIreland and Local Councils also offer a range of support to SMEs; you can find out more about support available more generally to businesses through the by contacting:

Invest NI's Business Support Team - 0800 181 4422

NI Business Information Website [www.nibusinessinfo.com](http://www.nibusinessinfo.com)

Please note that some support is only available to those companies that are Invest NI clients, while other support is available to the wider business base.

### Collaborative research and development support

Collaborative Networks and Clusters with a focus on product and/or service development may also avail of collaborative research and development (R&D) opportunities available throughout the UK and Europe, and via Invest Northern Ireland

Invest NI can help you access the following:

- Innovate UK funding competitions
- EU funding for innovation
- Innovation networks
- Knowledge Transfer Partnerships
- Innovation Vouchers

- Small Business Research Initiatives (SBRI)

Call the Invest NI Business Support Team on Tel 0800 181 4422 and speak to an innovation adviser to find out more.

### **Collaborate through knowledge transfer**

Knowledge transfer partnerships (KTPs) are a three way partnership between a business, an academic institution and a graduate. Funding may be available for those looking to participate in the scheme, if the eligibility criteria is met.

You can find out more at this link:

<https://www.investni.com/support-for-business/discover-the-knowledge-transfer-partnership.html> or by calling Invest NI's Business Support Team on Tel 0800 181 4422

### **Collaborate through Innovate Edge**

Invest NI hosts Northern Ireland's branch of the Innovate UK's 'Innovate Edge', the largest innovation and business network in the world. Innovate Edge supports new technology coming into or being developed in Northern Ireland that involves international co-operation.

If you are a small to medium-sized enterprise, Innovate Edge can help you:

- find new markets for your products
- find new ways of sourcing, selling or licensing technology
- connect to new partners for commercial, technology and R&D collaborations
- to be investment ready and understand how to access funding and finance
- with one to one tailored specialist support to improve the way you manage innovation
- understand how to protect your intellectual property
- with support and coaching to increase your capability to innovate and grow

You can find out more here:

<https://www.investni.com/support-for-business/innovation-research-and-development/innovate-uk-business-growth>

### **Innovate UK funding competitions**

Innovate UK, previously known as the Technology Strategy Board, is the UK's innovation agency. They support and fund business-led innovation across a range of industries. Innovate UK's funding competitions are open to all UK based businesses - from pre-start-ups and new companies to large multinational organisations. Some competitions aim to support collaborating projects and are open to research organisations working with business.

For additional advice and guidance on Innovate UK's programmes, you can contact **Invest Northern Ireland's Collaborative R&D Support Service** on Tel 0800 181 4422.



## Innovation Vouchers

An Innovation Voucher provides funding to small and medium sized businesses to work with an expert Knowledge Provider from a University, College or other Public Sector Research Body bringing new knowledge to help businesses innovate, develop and grow. In some instances Collaborative Networks and Clusters may find it beneficial to collectively pool Innovation Vouchers.

Typical projects we support include:

- Ideas for new or improved products, processes and services
- Access to information and expertise on new materials
- Tapping into research and scientific expertise

You can find out more information here:

<https://www.investni.com/support-for-business/innovation-vouchers.html>

## Intellectual Property Advice

Protecting your intellectual property is crucial if your business is developing a new product, service, brand or process.

Our specialist advisors can help with international patents and patent searches, trademarks and trademark searches and designs and copyright. From time to time, we also run seminars and events in partnership with the UK Intellectual Property Office, The British Library and the European Patent Office.

Eligible businesses can get financial assistance to carry out an Intellectual Asset Management Audit and to protect patents, trademarks, design registration and licensing agreements.

You can find out more here: <https://www.investni.com/support-for-business/protect-yourintellectual-property.html>

## Export / Trade Missions

Opportunities also exist to take part in Invest NI trade missions and/or shows.

You can find more information here: <https://www.investni.com/trade-mission/export-events.html>

# Chapter 7 - Outcomes and Impacts

## Why do we need a report? Who is the report for? Who will be reading it?

Regardless of whether you are participating in a Phase One or a Phase Two project you will be required to complete a Final Report at the end of your project.

The Facilitator/Cluster Manager will draft the report in conjunction with the members of the Network. The aim is to capture all the evidence gathered during the project and (in the case of Phase One cluster feasibility study) use this to inform the next steps, setting out the vision for the Network and a clear plan of action.

In the case of Phase Two Cluster project the report should capture and reflect outcomes, impacts and learnings as a result of the project (this is also the case for Phase One). More importantly, the report is also used to demonstrate the impact of the project on the participating members and stakeholders.

The primary audience for the report is the members of the Network/Cluster. These SMEs have defined the scope of the project and have agreed on the objectives; it is they who stand to benefit from the collaborative activity and therefore they must be satisfied that the report is comprehensive and fit for purpose.

As the project funders, Invest NI also have a stake in ensuring that the report addresses all the objectives in the Letter of Offer and represents value for money in respect of the public purse.

The allocated Programme Executive will review the draft final report and will more than often share it with colleagues within Invest NI and the wider public sector, depending on the subject matter. This is to ensure that the findings/outcomes/recommendations contained therein are feasible, relevant and factually accurate and to take into account any feedback that might improve the document.

In some instances depending on the subject matter, Invest NI would wish to avail of the report as a reference point/ best practice document and share with other Government Departments.

### **Report Writing Guidelines**

We acknowledge that the aim of the project is not simply to create a final report, however in order to demonstrate good project governance a final document is required. It is important that this document is of a professional standard and that it reflects the fact that public funding has been made available to support the work of the Network.

By 'professional' we mean the following:

- Devoid of typos
- Have numbered pages
- Contain an index page and an Executive Summary
- Be factually accurate
- Provide citations for all statistics and quotes
- Make use of the same font and layout conventions throughout
- Contain reference to the fact that funding from the project has come from Invest NI

### Process for sign-off

The content of your final report should be agreed and signed off by all members of the Network, before being submitted to Invest NI. If there are elements of your report that you wish to remain confidential, please indicate these clearly; Invest NI is subject to Freedom of Information legislation and may be required to share final reports, subject to any confidentiality provisions arising from the inclusion of commercially sensitive material.

After having reviewed your report the Programme Executive responsible for your project is more than likely to have feedback on the document; therefore please **do not pay your Facilitator/Cluster Manager in full until the final report has been signed off by Invest NI**. Invest NI will not pay out against any final claim from the Lead Company until the report is of a satisfactory standard and has addressed all the SMART objectives contained in the Letter of Offer.

## Chapter 8 - Next Steps

The Phase One Feasibility Study under The Cluster Acceleration Programme will result in one of three outcomes, all of which are deemed to be successful in their own right.

### No further action

Upon completion of the project, it was evident that the opportunities being sought either did not materialise as expected or additional development work needs to be completed before any commercial returns are realised. The result being that the companies forming the Network are better informed and able to focus on other areas, having explored their initial ideas.

### Potential for Development

Upon completion of the project, the scoping study highlighted development opportunities in the areas scoped / or additional opportunities from work carried out throughout the project.

The Network can proceed as an independent Network by self-funding any future development themselves or depending on the opportunities identified they may seek assistance from other organisations/ programmes.

### Implementation Potential

If a compelling evidence base has been gathered as part of a Phase One Cluster Feasibility Study, it may be possible to secure funding for a Phase Two Cluster Project. The decision to provide Phase Two funding will be solely at the discretion of Invest NI.

As with Phase One projects, the funding provided by Invest NI is intended to be used to engage the services of an independent facilitator (Cluster Manager) to carry out a project typically lasting for up to 5 years.

Phase Two projects will require a detailed SMART (Specific; Measurable; Activity-based; Realistic; Time-bound) objectives project plan, a risk register, a detailed budget and evidence of robust governance processes.

More information on making an application for Phase Two funding can be found in Chapter 8 of this Toolkit.

Please note, it is also possible to make an application on behalf of a Cluster consisting predominantly (or led by) 'large' companies, however in this instance the maximum rate of funding will be reduced to 50%.

## Chapter 9 – The Cluster Acceleration Programme

### Application Guidance Notes for Phase one Feasibility Study

#### General Guidance

- All applications for The Cluster Acceleration Programme funding must be made online via Invest NI's Customer Portal; to get access to the Portal you must be an Invest NI Client Company and request a link from The Cluster Acceleration Programme Team by emailing [collaborativegrowth@investni.com](mailto:collaborativegrowth@investni.com);
- As you move from section to section the application form will auto save, however you can also save your application manually as you go along, using the buttons provided
- To apply for funding under this particular Programme you must have a minimum of eight Northern Ireland SME companies who are prepared to collaborate on the proposed project. One of these companies should be an Invest NI Customer and be willing to take the Letter of Offer on behalf of the whole group;
- The Lead Company will be responsible for submitting the application form on behalf of the group; at any point of the application process if you wish to share the form with other members you can download it from the system and save it as a pdf;
- The role of the Lead Company is to act as an administrative vehicle, paying out the costs associated with the project and claiming the eligible grant back from Invest NI;
- In selecting a Lead Company you should therefore be aware that this company will need to recruit and pay the Facilitator on behalf of the whole group, and will therefore need the necessary cash flow to pay invoiced costs and then wait for settlement of the grant payment at a later date (typically within 30 days of submission of an acceptable claim);
- If the Lead Company is an NI based SME then Invest NI will pay 100% of eligible project costs; if the Lead Company is a large company (not an SME) then Invest NI can only pay 50% of eligible project costs ;

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- Please note an SME is defined as ‘An autonomous enterprise which has less than 250 employees and either turnover under €50 million per annum, or an annual balance sheet under €43 million and holds less than 25% of the capital or voting rights (whichever is the higher) in one or more enterprises and/or in which outsiders do not hold a stake of 25% of more of the capital or voting rights (whichever is the higher);
  - You should also seek to involve representatives of academic institutions and other stakeholders (such as large companies) as part of your membership; when developing the membership of your group you should consider the range of expertise and skills you will require to make the Feasibility Study a success;
  - Organisations from outside Northern Ireland can also be party to your application providing they are willing to provide the necessary benchmarking material and timesheets, and are in agreement with the Terms and Conditions of the Programme;
  - You can add new members to the group as the project develops; members may also drop out, but you should ensure that the overall membership does not drop below eight Northern Ireland SMEs.
  
  - To progress your application a member of the Invest NI team will carry out an appraisal on your proposed project and make a business case to secure funding; providing a clear, focused and evidence-based response to each question is therefore essential;
  - Please use Plain English and do not assume the reader has any prior knowledge of the sector, project or issues you face;
  - You are applying for support to help scope out a potential commercial opportunity; we do not expect you to have a fully formed project plan and/or detailed monetary targets at this stage; we do however need to have evidence that there is a reasonable prospect of commercial gain as a result of focusing on the particular concept, together with a willingness to work together on a project that individual companies could not tackle on their own;
  - We are ultimately seeking to fund specific projects that are innovative and have the potential to contribute to the economic development of N Ireland by contributing to growth in employment, export and skills enhancement. Proposed benefits may impact directly and or indirectly on the members of the collaborative group. At a Scoping Study level however we are looking for evidence of a potential opportunity and a clearly thought out action plan as to what steps need to be taken in order to help member companies take advantage of the opportunity.
  - Applications which rely on short generic statements, or which do not demonstrate sufficient robustness (in relation to either the overall project objectives or the proposed activities to be carried out), are unlikely to be successful.
  - Additional information to support your case (e.g. previous reports/letters of support etc.) may be submitted along with your application. Follow the instructions on the last page of the application form for more information on how to do this

## Section 1: Guidance

### Section 2: General Company Information

- This section of the Application form will be pre-populated with the Lead Company's details, as held on Invest NI's client database
- If any of the details we hold on the Lead Company are incorrect these can be amended manually in the application form

### Section 3: Network Members

Use the table provided to enter details of the SME Members of your Network, noting that you must have a minimum of 8 Northern Ireland SMEs (Lead Company and a further seven SMEs) in order to make an application. Please note that with the exception of the Lead Company Network SME participants do not necessarily need to be Invest NI Customers. You should make sure that all companies listed in this section are aware that they are being named as project participants and are in agreement with the aims and objectives of the project.

### Section 4: Stakeholder Members

Use the table provided to enter details of the stakeholders who will be participating in your Network, noting that these can include, as appropriate, academic institutions, large companies, public sector bodies and/or companies from outside Northern Ireland. You should make sure that all organisations listed in this section are aware that they are being named as project stakeholders.

### Section 5: Project Details

In this section you should give an overview of your project, including the name of the key contact, the project title and an overview (max 750 words) of the opportunity/challenge you are proposing to scope.

In this section please indicate the outcomes/benefits the members and/or the overall Network anticipate as a result of the project. These can be monetary (jobs/exports/sales – though less likely/not necessarily expected at scoping study stage) or non-monetary (upskilling/knowledge transfer/new business models/increased confidence in relation to innovation). As this is a Feasibility Study we do not expect you to provide definitive answers, but rather an estimate of the scale and type of benefits that could accrue.

In this section please indicate your company's level of inclusivity, sustainability and inclusivity practices. Use the free text boxes to elaborate on each where applicable.

### Section 6: SMART Objectives and Activities

In this section you should use the table provided to break your project down into a series of SMART objectives. These should reflect the aims of the project, and the specific tasks/activities

you anticipate the Facilitator carrying in order to deliver against the Network's requirements. We do not need finite detail, but rather the headline tasks that you plan to carry out;

The acronym SMART is often used as an aid to setting meaningful objectives, with each individual letter used to signify differing elements of the goal-setting process. Each objective you set should have the following characteristics:

### **S - Specific, significant, stretching**

Exactly what is it you want to achieve from your collaborative project/scoping study process?

Specific goals should explain the what, why, who, where and when of a goal. If your goal statement is vague, you will find it hard to achieve because it will be difficult to define success.

### **M - Measurable, meaningful, motivational**

You must be able to track progress and measure the result of your goal. A good goal statement answers the question, how much or how many? How will the Network know when it has met its objective/s?

### **A - Activity-Related; agreed upon, attainable, achievable, acceptable**

What activities will the Network (in conjunction with the Facilitator) undertake in order to address this objective? These activities must be relevant to the Network members and your stakeholders and agreed with them. You should take into consideration other constraints, such as finance, resources, timing, and regulatory, technical and operational limits?

### **R - Realistic, relevant, reasonable, rewarding, results-oriented**

Can the Network commit to the objective/s activities outlined above given the time and resources available?. Make sure the actions you need to take to achieve the objectives are things within the Network members' control.

### **T - Time-bound, timely, tangible, trackable**

Objectives must have a deadline. A good objective statement will answer the question, when will we achieve the objectives which we have set out? Without time limits, it's easy to put objectives off and leave them to die. As well as a deadline, it's a good idea to set some short-term milestones along the way to help you measure progress.

## **Section 7: Project Risks**

Please complete the Risk Register table taking into consideration any risks that may impact your ability to deliver against your **feasibility study objectives**. We do not expect you to identify either long-term risks aligned to the overall project, or risks which have a low probability of happening.

Each project will have a different set of risks, but these are likely to fall into one of the following categories: Governance; Commercial; Operational; Financial; Strategic; Environmental; Infrastructural; Regulatory; Legal. If you identify a particular risk that is not listed here, please feel free to add it. All projects must identify, and seek to mitigate against the risks arising from external factors such as Brexit and/or Covid-19.

Below you will find a **sample** Risk Register to help you start thinking about the risks to your own particular project:

Description	Impact	Mitigation	Probability
<b>Governance:</b> The Network currently consists of 10 SMEs; if one were to drop out of the project the Network would fail to meet the minimum criteria for funding.	High	The Feasibility Study will actively seek to identify and recruit new SME members and additional stakeholders aligned to the opportunities being pursued.	Medium
<b>Commercial:</b> The Network identifies 8 different commercial opportunities but does not have the resources to pursue all of these with similar levels of effort	Medium	The grant provided by Invest NI allows for the recruitment of an independent Facilitator who will work with Network members to prioritise opportunities in line with likely return and available skills.	Medium
<b>Operational:</b> Two Network members who have previously been in competition with each other are unable to agree an approach to a particular issue.	High	The Facilitator, in conjunction with the Network members will agree Terms of Reference at the start of the project; this will cover areas such as Intellectual Property, dispute resolutions and workshare arrangements.	High

## Section 8: Project Costs

Please provide an indication of how long each member expects to spend on the project. Please note that all members will be expected to demonstrate how much time is spent throughout the project by providing timesheets..

- Specific guidance on costs associated with the Cluster Acceleration Programme is provided below:
  - o Phase one Feasibility Study projects can apply for up to £60,000 to assist with scoping a specific commercial opportunity; eligible costs that can be funded under this grant include independent facilitation, specialist consultancy and study visit travel for the facilitator only;
  - o The Lead Company will be required to contract and engage an independent Facilitator on behalf of the entire group. This person must be acceptable to all group members and may not be an employee of any organisation that is party to the application;



- o The Lead Company should recruit the individual in line with current employment legislation and best practice for the appointment of consultants of this nature; Invest NI reserves the right to ask for evidence of a fair and transparent recruitment process and can withhold any/all of any subsequent grant if it deems that the correct process has not been followed;
- o Invest NI will require details of the daily rate negotiated with the Facilitator (up to a maximum of £450 a day); you should seek to ensure that this represents value for money as Invest NI reserves the right to challenge applications which indicate a rate deemed to be excessive in comparison to current average rates for work of this nature.
- o The Facilitator should absorb the costs of running the project within their daily rate; including the setting up of meetings, keeping records, travelling to and from meetings and /or events within N Ireland, which are deemed relevant by Invest NI and the group in establishing best practice and/or gathering information in the context of this project and preparing the claim etc. If other project participants wish to travel on a similar basis then they will be responsible for their own costs.
- o Visits may be undertaken outside of N Ireland by the facilitator in order to avail of best practice and /or gathering information in the context of the project. The rationale for such trips is to be provided in the application form and must be agreed by Invest NI before they are undertaken. The Invest NI leaflet “Streamlining Claims” outlines the eligible travel costs that may be claimed. The travel costs must be based on actual invoiced costs and must be detailed and vouched as part of any subsequent claim. The scoping study does not cover the costs incurred by any other project member attending a meeting/ workshop / study visit etc.
- o If an SME is acting as the Lead Company then the group may apply for 100% funding; if the Lead Company is deemed to be a Large business (not an SME) then the group may only apply for 50% funding; in these instances groups will be subject to vouching/verification of participant member salaries in order to ensure that the required grant match has been made.
- o In either case the group will need to demonstrate that they are engaged in genuine collaboration, using the skills of member companies in a complementary fashion; to this end, each participant in the project will be required to fill out a timesheet on a monthly basis;
- o INI reserves the right to withhold grant payment if a Network does not demonstrate true collaboration.

## Section 9: Why is Invest NI funding required (Additionality)

Please note that we are unable to fund projects that are likely to proceed at a similar speed and/or scope regardless of whether or not Invest NI provides funding; neither can we fund projects that are currently in receipt of any other funding, private or public sector, to address the same issue/s.

## Section 10: Declaration

The application should be signed and dated by the project owner representing the Lead Company. In doing so the individual concerned should be aware that he/she is signing on behalf of the whole group; Invest NI will infer that all group members are in agreement with the scope of the project and the terms and conditions associated with the Programme.

If you have any additional documents you would like to supply to support your application you can upload them using the instructions in this section.