APPLICATION GUIDELINES FOR THE CLUSTER ACCELERATION PROGRAMME (CAP) PHASE ONE FUNDING

General Guidance

- Businesses owned by Invest NI staff members are not eligible to apply;

- Please use Plain English and do not assume the reader has any prior knowledge of the sector, project or issues you face;

- In selecting a Lead Company you should 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);

- For the purposes of this grant, the Lead Company must operate a viable and profitable business, with sufficient cashflow to pay Facilitation Invoices on behalf of the Network.

- 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;

- 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 Feasibility 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. However, they will not form part of the application assessment process, only information contained in the space provided on the application sections will be used. Follow the instructions on the last page of the application form for more information on how to do add documents.

- Applications should demonstrate alignment with DfEs vision for the economy – Creating good jobs, achieving Net Zero, increasing productivity and ensuring regional balance.

Section 1: Guidance

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.

Section 2: Customer Details

- 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 (emerging cluster), noting that you must have a minimum of 8-10 Northern Ireland based SMEs in order to make an application. Please note that with the exception of the Lead Company, 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. Do not therefore include details of any companies who have not given consent to be included in the application.

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 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.

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. Do not include any who have not given consent.

Section 5: Project Detail

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.

Your response should cover all the specified outlined on the application form.

Project Benefits

In this section please indicate the outcomes/benefits the members (max 750 words) 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.

Your response should cover all the specified outlined on the application form.

Benefits to NI

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 out in order to deliver against the project 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?
If your goal statement is vague, you will find it hard to achieve because it will be difficult to define success.

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?

M - Measurable, meaningful, motivational

You must be able to track progress and measure the result of your goal. How will the Network know when it has met its objective/s?

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?

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 members and your stakeholders and agreed with them.

Activity-based:

Your objectives need to be realistic and activity based in order to be successful. 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'

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 members' control.

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 overachieving the objective?
- Does it match with our other efforts/needs?

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.

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.

Below you will find a **sample** SMART Objective to help you start thinking.

Specific	Measurable	Activity	Realistic	Timebound
Recruit a facilitator with suitable credentials to support the members and realise the project in full.	The successful recruitment of a Facilitator.	Develop Job Descriptions: Define qualifications, responsibilities, and expectations. Advertising & Outreach: Post job ads on industry platforms, LinkedIn, and recruitment agencies. Application Screening: Assess resumes for required skills and experience. Interview & Selection: Conduct one round of interviews Contracting & Onboarding: Finalise offers and ensure onboarding within the set timeline.	Existing experience resides within the Network membership in the practice of fair recruitment and tender processes. If needed, further guidance can be sought from resources such as www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk	Within 4 weeks.

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.

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
Governance: 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
Commercial: 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 members to prioritise opportunities in line with likely return and available skills.	Medium
Operational: Two 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 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 £55,000 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 travel costs must be based on actual invoiced costs and must be detailed and vouched as part of any subsequent claim. The Feasibility Study does not cover the costs incurred by any other project member attending a meeting/ workshop / study visit etc.

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 the 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 agree with the scope of the project and the terms and conditions associated with the Programme.