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| **INITIAL EQUALITY SCREENING FORM** |
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| DIVISION**:** | Regional Business Group | **TEAM:** | Regional Competitions |
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| **Name of Policy/Decision/Practice to be Equality Screened** |
| Ambition to Grow Supporting Women – October 2025 |
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| **Is it New or Revised?** | Revised |
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| **Who Does the Policy Effect, e.g Service Users/Staff:** | Service Users |
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| **Question 1** – Define the aim of the Programme. What is it trying to achieve? (Intended aims/outcomes) |
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| **Background:**Ambition to Grow Supporting Women (ATGSW) is a programme designed to increase the number of businesses Invest NI onboards as new clients and issues with an offer of grant assistance. The programme has been developed in partnership with Women in Business NI (WIBNI) and is targeted at businesses with a woman in a key decision making role who can influence the strategic direction of the business. Whilst the programme will contribute to a number of Invest NI business strategy targets, it will also work towards addressing the gender gap in entrepreneurship where fewer businesses are led by women, relative to the number of businesses led by men. ATGSW is delivered on an application call basis, with applications invited through the Invest NI website within a set period of time. ATGSW has been delivered through two previous calls, in October 2023 and October 2024, under the Ambition to Grow (ATG) pilot initiative. Equality Screening Forms were completed for these calls. As the proposed ATGSW October 2025 call has had a business case developed and approved through an Executive Casework Committee, it is deemed to be a programme in its own right and therefore requires relevant governance documents to be completed. This includes a stand alone Equality Screening. **Programme Overview:**ATGSW offers up to £30,000 per applicant to incentivise the creation of two new full-time equivalent jobs and the growth of the business into markets outside Northern Ireland. Support is broken down as follows:* £15,000 as employment grant, payable as £7,500 per new full-time equivalent jobs created over existing employment levels.
* £10,000 as development grant, payable at a rate of 50% of eligible costs relating to market/product/skills development.
* £5,000 as revenue grant, payable on completion of Innovate NI self-assessment, Invest NI Go Further Grow Stronger Export Health Checker and series of six leadership development workshops culminating in a presentation on business growth plans.

Businesses interested in applying complete a short, seven question, eligibility checker on the Invest NI website (below, with required answers in **bold)**. This checker is available during the call application window (9am Monday 6th October – 12noon Friday 24th October) and asks questions with a yes or no answer. The eligibility checker does not ask if a business is women led, has a female in a certain position etc, as we are not excluding men from applying to the programme, but rather aiming to particularly encourage women to apply, given that they are underrepresented within entrepreneurship.Q1 – Is your business currently based in Northern Ireland with at least one director/proprietor/partner residing here, and have less than 250 full-time equivalent staff? **Yes**  Q2 – Is your business currently generating sales? **Yes**  Q3 – Does your business have either annual turnover under £1m or annual sales to customers outside Northern Ireland of less than £300,000? **Yes**  Q4 – Does your business manufacture a product or provide a tradeable service? **Yes**  Q5 – Are any of the following the main activity of your business? (If you select “Yes” to any of these, your business may be ineligible) **No**  Activities include: o Agricultural Production o Fisheries & Aquaculture Sectors (Production and Processing) o Steel o Coal o Shipbuilding o Synthetic fibres o Transport and its infrastructure o Energy generation, distribution & its infrastructure o Infrastructure o Tourism accommodation o Visitor attractions o Healthcare services (in-person) o Wholesale o Retail (including online) o Distribution  Q6 – Has your business received an offer or payment of grant support from Invest NI within the last five years? **No**  (Excludes Covid-19 Emergency Funds, Innovation Vouchers, Economic Recovery Innovation Grant, Access to Finance funding or completed Business Innovation Grant projects)      Q7 – Can your business commit to creating two new full-time equivalent employment positions and generating new sales directly to customers outside Northern Ireland over the next two years? **Yes** **Aims/Objectives**ATGSW aims to onboard and support 20 businesses and has a budget for grant payments of £365,000. Businesses will be supported to create a total of 40 new good jobs, and to grow sales into markets outside Northern Ireland. Whilst the programme has economic benefits in terms of new jobs and external sales, there are wider benefits through the creation of a network of supported business whereby programme participants work together to overcome common obstacles particularly those faced by female entrepreneurs. This network will be supplemented by a series of six leaderships development workshops (with a £12,000 budget, including VAT, for its delivery) which will be linked to payment of the £5,000 revenue grant.   |
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| **Question 2** – Does the Programme have the potential to have an impact on the promotion of equality impact for any of the Section 75 groupings? (See Question 4 for list of equality groups.) |  |
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| If no go to Question 6 – Good Relations. | If yes, please continue and detail potential positive or negative impact. |
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| ATGSW has the potential to have a particularly positive impact on female entrepreneurs. By providing a digital application process and through the use of targeted marketing activity, ATGSW aims to removes potential barriers female entrepreneurs see when considering approaching Invest NI for support. The additional provision of a dedicated wraparound offering of six leadership development workshops increases the capability of participants and creates a strong network of businesses seeking to overcome common barriers. However, we are mot excluding men from applying to the programme and all applications will be assessed according to the strength of their businesses. Gender will not form part of the eligibility or success criteria. |
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| **Consideration of Available Date/Research** |
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| **Question 3** – What evidence is there available – statistics or perception – to help you decide who the Programme or might affect the most? i.e. What evidence, qualitative or quantitative, have you gathered to inform your decision making process? |
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| * **The Gender Index Northern Ireland 2024 Report** found that only 14.7% of companies in NI are women-led (the lowest in the UK), but new female-led incorporations rose by 71.5% from 2022 to 2023. Women lead 13% of NI’s fast-growth companies, slightly above the UK average.
* **Sync NI / Invest in Women Taskforce** reported that all-female-founded businesses in NI received just 2% of total equity funding in 2024, highlighting a significant funding gap.
* **Invest in Women Hub** confirmed the positive trend in fast-growth female-led companies and ongoing challenges in representation and funding.
* **Small Business Britain – Female Entrepreneurship: Moving Forward 2024** and **Money.co.uk** provided UK-wide context, showing women now lead 18% of UK companies, with strong growth in new incorporations but persistent disparities in funding and sector representation.

These sources collectively show that while women-led business activity is growing—especially in new company creation—significant gaps remain in funding, leadership, and overall representation, particularly in Northern Ireland* According to the **GEM 2024 reports**, women’s entrepreneurship in Northern Ireland continues to lag behind the UK average, but there are signs of improvement:
* **Early-stage entrepreneurship:** In 2023, only **7.2% of women in Northern Ireland** were engaged in early-stage entrepreneurial activity, compared to **10.0% in England**, **9.8% in Wales**, and **7.7% in Scotland**
* **Trends:** The gap between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK is narrowing, as NI has seen an upward trend in women’s entrepreneurial activity, while the UK average has slightly declined
* **Intentions:** Males in all UK regions, including NI, are still significantly more likely than females to report intentions to start a business in the next three years
* **Overall activity:** Despite historic underperformance, NI’s entrepreneurial activity and aspirations are now at their highest ever, with women’s participation rising
* **Barriers:** Structural challenges remain, including lower perceptions of start-up opportunities and persistent gender gaps in business ownership and leadership

**Summary:**Women in Northern Ireland remain less likely to start businesses than their counterparts elsewhere in the UK, but the region is showing positive momentum, with the gender gap slowly closing and overall entrepreneurial activity at record levels |

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| **Assessment of Impact** |
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| **Question 4** – Explain if what you plan to do is likely to be perceived as having a high, medium or low impact upon the 9 Equality groupings according to their needs. Also if what you are planning to do is likely to be perceived as having a positive or negative effect upon the 3 different groups in relation to the promotion of good relations. |
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| **9 Equality Groups** | **Perceived Impact****High – (H)****Medium - (M)****Low – (L)** | **Why this rating?** | **Promotion of Good Relations****(Yes/No)** | **Why this rating?** |
| Religious Belief | L | This programme does not actively target or exclude individuals from this grouping.  | No | While the programme aims to improve economic prosperity, it does not specifically address the promotion of Good Relations. |
| Racial/Ethnic Group | L | This programme does not actively target or exclude individuals from this grouping. | No | While the programme aims to improve economic prosperity, it does not specifically address the promotion of Good Relations. |
| Political Opinion | L | This programme does not actively target or exclude individuals from this grouping. | No | While the programme aims to improve economic prosperity, it does not specifically address the promotion of Good Relations. |
| Age | L | This programme does not actively target or exclude individuals from this grouping. | No | While the programme aims to improve economic prosperity, it does not specifically address the promotion of Good Relations. |
| Gender | M | ATGSW targets female entrepreneurs and encourages them to apply for Invest NI support and is deemed likely to result in a medium positive impact on this grouping.  | No | While the programme aims to improve economic prosperity, it does not specifically address the promotion of Good Relations. |
| Marital Status | L | This programme does not actively target or exclude individuals from this grouping. | No  | While the programme aims to improve economic prosperity, it does not specifically address the promotion of Good Relations. |
| Sexual Orientation | L | This programme does not actively target or exclude individuals from this grouping. | No | While the programme aims to improve economic prosperity, it does not specifically address the promotion of Good Relations. |
| Disability | L | This programme does not actively target or exclude individuals from this grouping. | No | While the programme aims to improve economic prosperity, it does not specifically address the promotion of Good Relations. |
| Dependants | L | This programme does not actively target or exclude individuals from this grouping. | No | While the programme aims to improve economic prosperity, it does not specifically address the promotion of Good Relations. |
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| **Opportunities to better promote Equality of Opportunity** |
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| **Question 5** – Are there steps which could be taken to reduce any adverse impact upon the Section 75 groups as identified in Question 4? |
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| No adverse impact on Section 75 groups has been identified.  |
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| **Good Relations** |
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| **Question 6** – Is there an opportunity in what you are trying to do to better promote Good Relations between the groups relating to Religious Belief or Racial/Ethnic Group or Political Opinion? |
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| None anticipated given the nature of this support is to businesses rather than individuals. |

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| **Consultation** |
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| **Question 7** – Tell us about who have talked to about your proposals internally or externally to help you decide if the needs further or no further equality investigation. |
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| Consultation on this programme and the wider ATG initiative has taken place internally with a number of teams including Performance, Compliance & Co-ordination; Business Appraisal Team; Regional Business Group; International Trade; Offers & Claims; E-business; Regional Business Managers and Invest NI Equality Unit. Externally, WIBNI have been consulted in detail on the design of the programme. The ATGSW programme is marketed as being developed in partnership with WIBNI.  |
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| **Question 8** – In light of the above should the programme be: |
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| x[x]  | Screened Out – No Equality Issues – Please provide rationale for this decision. |
| The Ambition to Grow Supporting Women programme is not anticipated to impact negatively on any Section 75 groups. The programme is being marketed at businesses with a woman in a key decision-making role, with marketing collateral for the programme emphasising this target audience. The eligibility criteria for the programme and scoring matrix do not include any gender requirement.The wide and varied promotion of ATGSW, along with that taking place for other Invest NI programmes, will help businesses/ stakeholders to understand Invest NI’s remit, and the publicity will ensure Invest NI’s continued relevance for SMEs throughout NI.Funding is available through Invest NI’s baseline budget to provide incentives to businesses seeking to grow external sales and with this create new jobs. Feedback from WIBNI is that a portion of their membership has the potential to meet Invest NI client criteria but due to perceived barriers in approaching us via phone or email leading to an in-person meeting, a primarily digital approach is preferred. ATGSW therefore encourages female entrepreneurs to apply for support and to reduce the risk of missed opportunities, whilst not excluding male applicants.   |
| [ ]  | Screened Out with some adjustments. – What adjustments have you made? |
| N/A |
| [ ]  | Screened In for a deeper level of analysis of what is being considered or intended to be undertaken. (EQIA) – Please provide rationale for this decision. |
| N/A |
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| Signed: | Ronan Trainor | Date: | 23/9/2025 |
|  | Ronan Trainor - Head of Regional Competitions |  |  |
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| Approved | Pamela Marron | Date: | 25/09/25 |
|  | Equality Manager |  |  |
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| Modifications made. | Date: |       |
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| Approved by Equality Manager |  |  |