

# CLUSTER ACCELERATION PROGRAMME

Toolkit:  
FAQ's



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## Letter of Offer/Letter of Adherence

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

The Letter of Offer forms the contract between the Network (via the Lead Company) and Invest NI; it contains 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 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 member companies (see below for more information on State Aid).

### What is the difference between the end date and the claim date in the Letter of Offer?

The end date is the date by which all costs associated with the project must be incurred and paid out against. The claim date (typically three months after the end date) is the date by which all claims associated with the project must be submitted to Invest NI.

### What if I want to change my LoO objectives once the project has started?

If, having started your Scoping Study, the group collectively decides that one or more objective is no longer relevant, or wants to add a new objective to the project plan, the Facilitator/Lead Company should discuss this with the Invest NI Programme Executive. If all parties are in agreement the objectives can be amended.

### What happens if an SME/Stakeholder drops out of the project once it has started?

In order to meet the criteria for funding Cluster Acceleration Programme projects must comprise a minimum of 8-10 Northern Ireland SMEs. If your Network drops below this minimum due to an SME dropping out of the project then you should seek to replace this company with an alternative – preferably a company with a similar (or relevant) skillset. If you are unable to bring the Network back to a minimum quota of 8-10 SMEs, Invest NI reserves the right to withdraw the Letter of Offer.

If a company withdrawing from your project does not take you below the minimum criteria of 8-10 SMEs, then you should consider whether or not you need to replace this member in order to ensure the project is delivered successfully. If you are in a position to continue with the project then there is no need to find a replacement.

### What happens if a new participant joins the Network once the project has started?

If a new SME joins the project once it has started you must let your Invest NI Programme Executive know. The new project partner must subsequently sign and return a Letter of Adherence.

## Facilitation

### Where do I find a Facilitator?

There are a number of individuals in the market who have suitable skills for facilitating projects such as those funded under the Cluster Acceleration Programme. These individuals often work on a freelance basis and are likely to have had previous experience working on similar projects. Invest NI holds a non-vetted list of individuals who are currently operate as facilitators/consultants/interim managers. You are welcome to have access to this database, with the caveat that Invest NI is not able to vouch for the skills, suitability or availability of any individual on the list. Please bear in mind that a Facilitator must not be an individual who is already working for any of the companies/organisations participating in the project.

### Who appoints the Facilitator?

For Phase One Scoping Study projects the Lead Company, in conjunction with Network members, should invite a minimum of three parties to provide quotes for facilitation of the project. Invest NI can provide you with templates of tender documents and facilitator job description. Having obtained three quotes, it is then good practice to interview the candidates before making an appointment. Once you have agreed on a candidate who is acceptable to all members of the Network, the Lead Company should then formally engage that individual via a contract in line with best practice.

### Who pays the Facilitator?

The Lead Company is responsible for paying the Facilitator. Providing these costs are in line with those agreed in the Letter of Offer, the Lead Company can then claim this amount back from Invest NI.

### How often do I need to pay the Facilitator?

The Lead Company should agree the Facilitator's terms at the outset of the project; all costs associated with the project must be paid by the Lead Company at intervals (no less than bi-monthly) agreed with the Facilitator in advance of starting the project and then claimed back from Invest NI on a retrospective basis. Please note that Invest NI will pay out claims against the Cluster Acceleration Programme on a bi-monthly basis, as a minimum.

### What happens if the Network is not satisfied with the Facilitator's work?

If you are not happy with the quality of the Facilitator's work, or if there is a disagreement as to approach etc, good practice dictate that you should seek to resolve this through discussing the issue with the Facilitator in the first instance.

If the matter cannot be resolved, then you may wish to consider terminating the contract and appointing a new Facilitator. Please bear in mind that the Lead Company must follow best practice in both the recruitment and, if necessary, the termination of any employment contract.

## Project Finance

### **What can I use my Cluster Acceleration Programme grant for?**

Funds from the Programme are primarily to be used to secure the services of an independent Facilitator. A limited number of additional cost categories are available and will vary from project to project. These include the costs of a study visit (where relevant – and to cover the Facilitator's costs only). The costs categories that are applicable to your project will be detailed in your Letter of Offer. We do not consider administrative costs to be a separate category, but rather these should be covered by the fee you agree with the Facilitator. Likewise, we will not pay out against costs incurred as a result of booking rooms for meetings and/or any associated catering or hospitality. (you should seek to have your meetings at a partner location).

### **What happens if my costs exceed the grant amount?**

Invest NI will only pay out against the total amount of grant noted in the Letter of Offer. If the Network overspends then responsibility for meeting this shortfall rests with the individual companies and organisations who comprise the Network.

### **How often can I put a claim in?**

We will accept claims against the Cluster Acceleration Programme no more regularly than bi-monthly. If you prefer to make one claim at the end of the project that is equally acceptable.

### **Who is responsible for submitting the claim?**

The Lead Company is responsible for drawing down the grant, however you may wish to have the Facilitator be responsible for putting the claim document together.

### **How quickly will my claim be paid?**

Providing the claim and supporting documents (eg. timesheets) are in order, Invest NI has a claim turnaround target of 30 days.

### **Can I claim VAT?**

Support is paid net of VAT.

### **Can I claim for Facilitator/Network Member mileage?**

Invest NI does not pay mileage for either Facilitators or Network members. When agreeing a fee with your Facilitator you should ensure that he/she is aware of this.

**What is meant by 'eligible costs'?**

Eligible costs are those costs which are agreed with Invest NI at the outset of the project, and which are detailed in the Letter of Offer. Any costs incurred outside this category will not be paid by Invest NI and will remain the responsibility of the Network to settle.

**Where can I find out more about the Claims Process?**

The Cluster Acceleration Programme operates on the basis of cost-based claims; you can find out more about the process, and download the relevant documentation here:

<https://www.investni.com/support-for-business/submitting-your-claim.html>

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## Timesheets

### How often must we complete/submit timesheets?

Invest NI requires each SME member of a Network to complete a timesheet detailing the amount of time they have spent on the project. Each time a claim is made the timesheets relating to the period being claimed for must be submitted. We recommend that you get into a routine of completing a timesheet on a weekly basis, as it can be difficult to remember activities once a longer time has passed. A sample timesheet is available for you to use.

### What are the timesheets used for?

The Cluster Acceleration Programme is designed to support SMEs and stakeholder organisations to collaborate. To provide evidence that the Programme is generating genuine collaboration we require timesheets to be completed. The timesheets also assist us in demonstrating that the Programme represents value for money and has the potential to leverage valuable SME time contributions.

### What tasks/activities can I put on my timesheet?

You should note any activities related to the project, including travelling to and attendance at meetings, desk research, conversations related to the project/subject within your individual organisations; participation in wider business activities related to the project etc. When completing the timesheet you should aggregate your time where possible.

## Final Report

### Who is responsible for drafting the Final Report?

The Facilitator should draft the final report, in conjunction with the Network members. It should then be provided to Invest NI as a draft for further feedback and if necessary, refinement.

### What is the deadline for getting the Final Report to Invest NI?

All costs associated with Cluster Acceleration Programme projects must be incurred and paid before the end date in your Letter of Offer. You then have until the claim date to submit your claim (typically three months after the end date).

Bearing in mind that we recommend not paying the balance of the Facilitator fee until the report has been completed and signed off by Invest NI you should seek to get a draft of the report to Invest NI at least four weeks before the end date.

### Should I pay my Facilitator before the Final Report has been signed off?

See above. We recommend that you withhold final payment to the Facilitator until the report has been signed off by both the Network members and Invest NI.

**Will the Final Report be made public?**

Since the project is the subject of public funding, we reserve the right to make the Final Report public, as appropriate. We are however mindful that the final document is likely to contain commercially sensitive material and therefore we will work with each individual Network to ensure that confidentiality is maintained, where required.

## General

**How often should the Network meet?**

The Facilitator should draft the final report, in conjunction with the Network members. It should then be provided to Invest NI as a draft for further feedback and if necessary, refinement.

**Where should the Network hold its meetings?**

We normally suggest that monthly meetings be rotated around participants' premises; in addition to ensuring that no one organisation bears responsibility for hosting all the meetings, it also ensures that members have the opportunity to familiarise themselves with each other's premises.

**Should we invite an Invest NI representative to each meeting?**

While it is up to each individual Network to decide who should be in attendance at each meeting, there are advantages in inviting your Invest NI contact – not least because it provides you with an opportunity to maintain your project's visibility within the wider Invest NI community.

**Can we publicise our Network/project?**

We would encourage you to publicise your Network and its activities, as appropriate. Please note that under the terms of your grant Invest NI, must be given credit for providing the funding to support the Network. In addition, any news releases, feature stories or 'think-pieces' which reference the project must be cleared by the Invest NI Corporate Communications team before they are released. Your Cluster Acceleration Programme contact will assist you with obtaining the requirement clearance.