



INVEST NI AMBITION TO GROW | SUPPORTING WOMEN

October 2024

GUIDANCE NOTES

This document provides guidance on the **Ambition to Grow | Supporting Women** (ATG | SW) programme including eligibility criteria, application process and information required. If you are considering applying for ATG | SW, please read this document along with our [FAQs](#) carefully before submitting an application.

OVERVIEW

Invest Northern Ireland (Invest NI) has launched a programme to support women-led businesses to access Invest NI support, increase employment levels and generate or grow sales outside Northern Ireland.

The programme will provide grant support to eligible businesses on a competitive basis to help them create new employment within the business. It will also assist them with the costs of targeting markets outside Northern Ireland, technical development activities, and upskilling existing and new employees.

The **maximum** level of grant support offered through ATG | SW will be £30,000 per applicant with the amount of grant offered dependent on activities listed within the application form as well as Invest NI budget availability. Payment of grant will be dependent on key activities being undertaken and expenditure being made, and all claims against the grant offer must be made before 30 January 2027.

It is hoped the ATG | SW will attract a spread of applications from throughout all areas of Northern Ireland. ATG | SW is managed and administered by Invest NI.

The call for applications will open on **Wednesday 9 October 2024 at 9:00** and will close on **Friday 8 November 2024 at 12 noon**. Invest NI reserves the right to close the application call earlier, or extend its opening, depending on the volume of applications received. Only applications submitted via the MyINI portal at the agreed closure time, or any extended closing point will be considered.

Please note this is a **two-stage competitive application process**. The first stage is the completion of an **online application**, which will be assessed and scored against the programme criteria. The second stage will involve the top-ranking applications from stage one being invited for a **face-to-face meeting** to validate the information provided in the application form and this meeting will be scored on a pass/fail basis.

Applicants that are successful in the second stage will be issued with an offer of support subject to satisfactory Know Your Customer (KYC) checks.



The number of offers made will depend on budget availability, with offers being made to the top-ranking applicants that pass the validation meeting and working down the list until available funding is committed.

Should an applicant decline to accept an offer, it may be offered to the next ranked application. Should there be additional budget available, and further application calls open, applicants that are unsuccessful in this call will be able to apply in future.

ELIGIBILITY

ATG | SW is aimed at start-up and established micro, small, or medium sized enterprises based in Northern Ireland, which have either turnover under £1m or sales to customers outside Northern Ireland of less than £300k. Invest NI is seeking to support businesses in the manufacturing or international tradeable services sectors that have plans to increase sales from customers outside NI and with this increase employment levels. Businesses that participate in innovative activities, paying higher salaries for new positions as well as those adding value to a product are also likely to score highly.

This programme is primarily aimed at woman-led businesses that are not currently Invest NI clients and that have not received an offer of grant support from Invest NI within the last five years (not including Covid-19 emergency support measures, Economic Recovery Innovation Grant, Innovation Vouchers or Access to Finance funding such as the Techstart Proof of Concept grant).

Businesses that have received an offer or payment of Invest NI support within the last five years (not including Covid-19 emergency support measures, Economic Recovery Innovation Grant, Innovation Vouchers or Access to Finance) may be able to apply for ATG | SW support subject to all other eligibility criteria being met. These businesses should contact their Invest NI Client Executive to discuss if an application can be accessed.

Businesses must meet all the following criteria:

- The business must currently be based in Northern Ireland, with Directors based in Northern Ireland.
- The business must be an SME (fewer than 250 employees and with Turnover less than or equal to €50m or Balance Sheet total less than or equal to €42m.)
- The business must provide a value-added commercial product and/or service.
- The business must currently have either annual turnover less than £1m or have annual sales to customers outside NI less than £300k.
- The business must not have received an offer or payment of grant support from Invest NI within the last five years (this does not include COVID-19 emergency funds, Economic Recovery Innovation Grant (ERIG), Innovation Vouchers or Access to Finance funding) or must meet all other criteria and have the agreement of its Invest NI Client Executive to access an application form.
- The business must intend to create at least two new employment positions before January 2027.
- The business must intend to grow sales from customers outside NI.



- The business must be able to demonstrate that it is a viable business and will remain so for the duration of the period of Invest NI support, with evidence that the business has sufficient resources to meet any funding gaps.
- The proposed business activity must be a strategic fit with the [Invest NI Business Strategy 2024-2027 \(Draft\)](#).
- The Business must accept the completion of Invest NI Customer Due Diligence checks on the business, including a credit check.

If you are a business that is part of a group structure with the same ultimate ownership, you may only submit one application across the group.

EXCLUSIONS

The following are not eligible to apply:

- Businesses already in receipt of or intending to gain other government support for the proposed new employment and/or growth activities.
- Businesses that have an outstanding liability to Invest NI brought about through grant clawback proceedings. If a satisfactory repayment plan is in place, the business may apply for consideration.
- Businesses, or where any member of Senior Management within the business, are subject to a current bankruptcy order, Individual Voluntary Arrangement, Company Voluntary Arrangement, County Court Judgement, or Company Director Disqualification.
- Businesses that have any of the following as its core business activity: agricultural production; fisheries and aquaculture sectors (production and processing); steel; coal; shipbuilding; synthetic fibres; transport and its infrastructure; tourism accommodation; energy (generation, distribution, and its infrastructure); wholesale; retail (including on-line); distribution.
- Applications which include or relate to activities that Invest Northern Ireland considers as ineligible or as involving an unacceptable reputational risk, such as gambling, tobacco products and drug-based products which are not authorised as medicines.

ELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES

The aim of this programme is to incentivise Northern Ireland based women-led SMEs to grow into markets outside Northern Ireland (“external markets”) and to increase their employment levels here through the addition of several well-paid jobs.

For an application to be considered eligible it must outline the creation of two new full-time equivalent employment positions before January 2027.

Full-Time Equivalent positions can be a combination of Full-Time roles (contracted for 30+ hours per week and equivalent to one FTE) or Part-Time roles (contracted for 15-30 hours per week and equivalent to 0.5 FTE).



Support may be provided towards other activities that positively impact the growth of the business into new markets, the efficiency and competitiveness of the business, the strategic direction of the business, the skills base of the business or activities that result in the development of new products and services.

A maximum of £30,000 is available for each successful applicant as follows:

- £10,000 towards new employment within the business. This will consist of £5,000 for each new full-time equivalent position created over current employment levels, with a maximum of two new positions being supported.

- £10,000 towards business development activities, where the amount of support provided shall be no more than 50% of the cost of eligible activities as detailed below.

- £10,000 on the completion of an Export Health Check, Export Marketing Plan, Innovate NI Self-Assessment, and participation on a series of Invest NI Leadership Development workshops.

State Aid limits will apply which may limit the level of support provided in some circumstances, depending on the level of salaries being proposed for new employment. The total value of grant offered will be no more than 30% of two times the total annual salaries of new proposed employment.

Payment of grant money is not up-front and will be dependent on the delivery of specific activities as outlined in any offer of support e.g., creation and verification of new employment. Evidence will be required to demonstrate that the specific activities against which grant money is being claimed have been conducted and paid for.

New employment must be the creation of permanent NI based positions directly within the business and is based on the creation of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) roles.

Eligible business development activities are costs that are incurred through the engagement of third party, arm's length providers where an invoice is raised for services provided. Examples of eligible costs include, but are not limited to:

Fairs & Exhibitions outside NI – attendance or participation

- Travel and Accommodation for two company representatives.
- Stand rental costs.
- Stand assembly costs (e.g., exhibition stand contractor's fees).
- Stand operating costs (e.g., insurance, electricity, interpreter).
- Equipment transportation costs.
- Exhibition speaking slots, VIP passes and pitch opportunities.



Marketing

- Specialist expertise not part of the client's normal expenditure for web site design and promotional video and animation design for use on the Client's website.
- Advertising outside NI including design, production & placement costs but excluding the purchase of mailing or membership lists and pay per click and display advertising costs for online advertising platforms including but not limited to Google, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram.

Product Launches/Seminars Open Days/Special Event Days.

- Costs for publicity and promotional materials (excluding printing costs)

Product & Business Development Consultancy Fees and Expenses

- Specialist expertise not part of the client's normal expenditure.
- Packaging design.
- Product protection registration and legal costs.
- Costs for preparation for quality standards audit only, excluding quality standard audit costs.

Training

- Non-mandatory training or qualification costs for employees agreed in advance with Invest NI

The following costs are not eligible:

- Capital purchases e.g., machinery, IT equipment.
- Items defined as being a cost of sale e.g., raw materials.
- Items already part of a business's outgoings or overheads e.g., rent, standard accountancy services.
- Expenditure related to growing sales of the business in NI.
- Recruitment costs.
- Online marketing costs where expenditure is incurred directly with the online platform e.g., Facebook, Google, and LinkedIn. Costs incurred via a third party such as a digital agency are eligible for inclusion.
- Costs incurred prior to the issue of an offer of support. Employees recruited prior to the issue of an offer of support will not be eligible for grant payment.

The above lists are not exhaustive and proposed expenditure included in an application will be deemed eligible/non-eligible as appropriate.

The support will focus on activities that take place within a defined time, with all activities to be completed and grant claimed within the timescales detailed within the offer of support.

TIMESCALES



Ambition to Grow Supporting Women is a competitive call for applications. The call for applications will open at **9:00 on Wednesday 9 October 2024** and will close at **12 noon on Friday 8 November 2024**. The call may be closed early or extended depending on the volume of applications received.

Applications must be submitted prior to the call closing.

As this is a competitive call, please take note of the Assessment Process detailed in this document and ensure you read and check your application form before submitting. Corrections or additional information provided after the application call closes will not be accepted. All information must be included within the application form and please note that appended business plans, spreadsheets etc. (except for accounts/management accounts and financial projections) will not be considered part of the application.

HOW TO APPLY

The first step is to check that you are eligible to apply for ATG | SW by using the eligibility checker, which will be available from **9:00 on Wednesday 9 October 2024** at investni.com/ambitiontogrow.

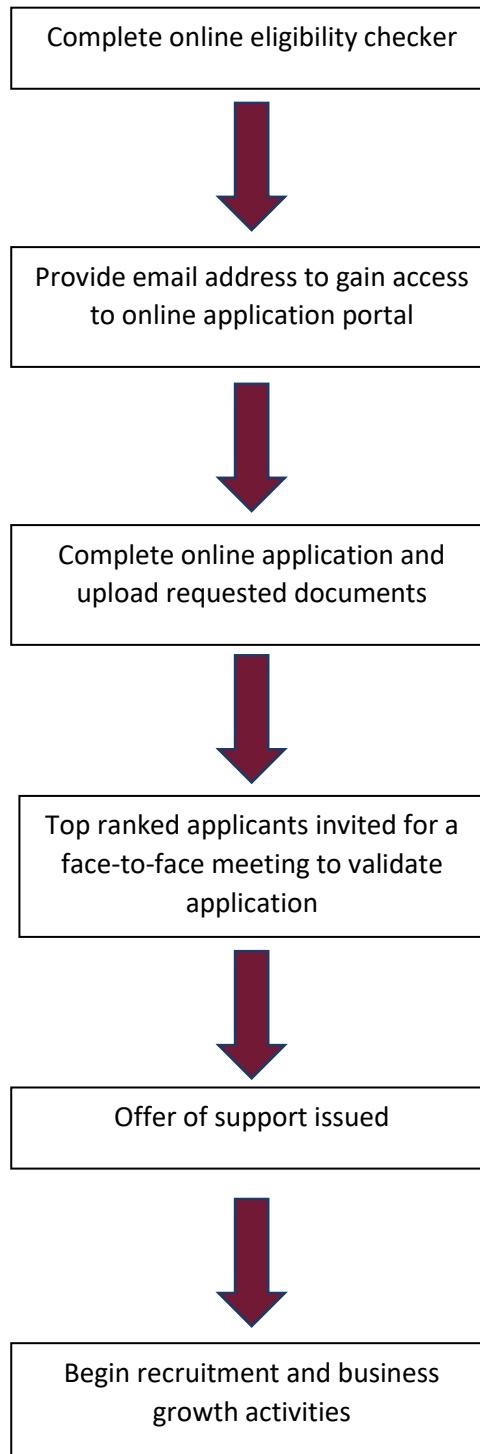
If you meet the eligibility criteria, you will be issued with a link to an online application form via our online portal.

In addition to completing the online application form you will also need to provide a digital copy of your most recent annual accounts (to include a Profit & Loss Account and Balance Sheet), together with any recently available management accounts. If your business has not yet compiled annual accounts, you can submit your most up to date management accounts.

Please note the maximum size of each item that can be submitted digitally is 20MB.

The application form should take approximately two hours to complete if you have all the information to hand e.g., if you have recently completed a business plan. It may take longer if you are starting from nothing. You can save a draft of your application and return to update it at any time prior to submitting before the application call closure – regular saving of the application is recommended. You will need to click on the 'Submit' button when you have completed the application.

The application has been designed to be completed by the owner/operator of the business. If the applicant gets through to the second stage, the meeting will be conducted with company management, who must be a director/partner/proprietor. It is hoped that this will ensure businesses with a genuine interest in generating the greatest economic return will be successful, rather than those most proficient at completing application forms.



ASSESSING YOUR APPLICATION

Applications will be assessed by an assessment panel that will primarily consist of members of the Invest NI Female Entrepreneurship Team. All applications received will be scored in line with the



Assessment Criteria detailed below, with the top-ranking applications that meet or exceed the minimum threshold being invited for a validation meeting, subject to budget availability.

On successful completion of the validation meeting, and subject to successful Know Your Customer (KYC) checks, applicants will then be offered financial support towards their proposed new employment and business growth activities. Should an applicant not be successful in the validation meeting stage, the next highest scoring applicant may be invited for a validation meeting.

An Invest NI Assessment Panel will assess applications using the following criteria:

Assessment Criteria	Maximum Score
<p>1. How well does the proposed new employment and growth activities fit with the Invest NI and NI Government strategy for economic development?</p> <p>Please see our Business Strategy 2024-2027 (Draft).</p>	20
<p>2. How much of a difference will Invest NI support make to the speed, scope and/or scale of the projected growth? Would some or all the activity happen anyway, regardless of getting grant support?</p>	30
<p>3. What level of risk is attached to Invest NI providing a grant to the business, what is the likelihood of success, how financially viable is the business and what is the likelihood it will be financially viable in the future?</p>	20
<p>4. Is the proposal economically efficient? By how much do the benefits of the proposed activity for the business and Invest NI exceed the costs?</p>	20
<p>5. Will the proposed activities displace the sales of other businesses in NI or GB?</p>	5
<p>6. What impact will your proposed activities have on the labour market in NI and GB?</p>	5

It is important you consider the assessment criteria and ensure your application clearly articulates how you plan to deliver the new employment and business growth activities and include relevant achievable outcomes and outputs to achieve the highest possible score.



Demonstration of the following will be considered as part of the scoring of the Strategic Fit criteria in addition to those areas covered within our current business strategy e.g., exports, innovation, higher paying jobs:

- Payment of the Real Living Wage or above
- No inappropriate use of zero hours contracts
- Actions to target the economically inactive
- Positive environmental impact
- Commitment to developing and training employees
- Active role in local community
- Actions to support equality of opportunity for all*

**Aligned to the protected characteristics of the Equality Act 2010 - age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.*

ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Know Your Customer

It is important that in the administration of public funds that Invest NI is diligent in its checks and knows sufficient detail about its customer before proceeding with offering financial support.

To be considered for funding, your application must achieve a pass in the Invest NI Know Your Customer process.

This Know Your Customer process will review the following:

- Photographic ID & Identity Documentation
- Credit Check on the applicant/named Company individuals and the company itself.
- Information provided in your application form is aligned to publicly held information and is in no way misleading.
- Your business and any member of Senior Management within the business are not subject to a current bankruptcy order, Individual Voluntary Arrangement, Company Voluntary Arrangement, County Court Judgement, or Company Director Disqualification
- You are not currently involved in a CVA either through the applicant company or a linked company.

We will complete a credit check, searches on Companies House, web searches and any other due diligence, as required, to satisfy our Know Your Customer process.

If any misleading information or elevated risk factors are found in your application, it could be escalated to an Invest NI director for review and decision on whether to proceed with your application.

Application Detail



To be considered for funding, your application must achieve at least 40% in each criterion. Any application that does not meet this threshold will be deemed ineligible for funding.

Where two or more applications have the same overall score:

- the higher score in Criteria 1 will be given priority.
- if scores are still equal, the higher score in Criteria 2 will be given priority.
- if scores are still equal, the higher score in Criteria 3 will be given priority.
- if scores are still equal, the higher score in Criteria 4 will be given priority.
- if scores are still equal, the higher score in Criteria 5 will be given priority.
- if scores are still equal, the higher score in Criteria 6 will be given priority.

Following the assessment process, eligible applications will be ranked in order of the highest to lowest score.

The top-ranking applications will be invited for a face-to-face meeting to validate the information provided within the application. This meeting will be with the business owner/operator and not with consultants or accountants associated with the business.

Funding will be awarded to applicants that pass the second stage in order of ranking until the available funding budget is fully allocated. Please note that, even if an application is deemed eligible this is not a guarantee of funding as all funding could be allocated before reaching lower ranked applications.

Should a business be unsuccessful with an application to this call, it can apply to future Ambition to Grow calls as and when they open.

NOTIFICATION OF FUNDING DECISION

Following closure of the application call at the closing time of **12 noon on Friday 8 November 2024** the received applications will be assessed, with the top scoring applicants invited for a meeting when the scoring process is complete.

If you hope to secure Invest NI funding for your proposed new employment and business growth activities, it is vital that you do not commence recruitment or incur any costs until you receive an offer of support from Invest NI. If you incur costs because you have signed contracts, given permission to start work, raised invoices or made payments before you have received an Invest NI Letter of Offer, these costs cannot be claimed for and could prevent you from accessing any of the grant funding awarded. Any argument that Invest NI support is required to proceed will be placed in question and will impact the scoring of the application.

Following the second stage, and on completion of Know Your Customer (KYC) checks, successful applicants will be informed, and a Letter of Offer will be issued.

Unsuccessful applicants will be informed via email.

APPEALS PROCEDURE



Applications will be assessed by an assessment panel that will primarily consist of members of the Invest NI Female Entrepreneurship Team. All applications received will be scored in line with the Assessment Criteria detailed above, with the top ranked applications that meet or exceed the minimum threshold being invited for a validation meeting which will be scored on a pass/fail basis. On successful completion of the meeting, and subject to budget availability they will then be offered financial support towards the proposed employment and growth activities.

In the first instance, if an applicant is unhappy with the outcome of their application, they can seek feedback on their application and areas where it did not score highly relevant to other applications. It is hoped this feedback will be taken on board and used to strengthen any future application made to any future Ambition to Grow calls that may be opened.

Should an applicant still be unhappy with the outcome, they can request a review of the scoring of their application. This review will be deemed to be an appeal made under Stage 1 of Invest NI's Appeals Procedure, a copy of which can be provided on request.

Any appeal must be submitted within **30 working days** of receipt of notification of the original decision to atgappeals@investni.com

YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES

You are responsible for providing accurate and true information on your application.

The provision of wrong or misleading information is an offence and any such information may be used in any subsequent criminal investigation.

The information provided on this application form may be made available to other departments or agencies for the purposes of preventing or detecting crime.

Support is conditional on the business progressing in line with what is outlined in the application and the business securing new employees, with the requirement that assisted employment is maintained for a minimum of three years. Should new employees be taken on, grant be drawn down and then employment levels decrease within three years from payment of the relevant grant, repayment of grant money (in full or in part) may be sought.

In return for Invest NI funding we will expect:

- You to work in partnership with us to grow your business and the Northern Ireland economy.
- Quality jobs to be created in your company within agreed timescales.
- An increase in the sales of your product or service outside Northern Ireland
- Financial transparency
- Progress reports as and when requested.
- A commitment to be an environmentally and socially responsible business.

A full outline of conditions will be provided to the successful businesses in an Invest NI Letter of Offer to be signed and returned by the applicant for the support to be available.

DATA PROTECTION AND HANDLING



ATG is managed and administered by Invest NI who will have access to the information you provide as part of your application; both to assess your eligibility and to conduct any post scheme governance assessments.

As this financial support is sourced from public funds Invest NI will, in the interest of openness and transparency, proactively publish limited information on the funding including:

- name of applicant
- application title
- amount of assistance

Invest NI will handle your data in compliance with applicable laws including the General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018. For further details on our data handling practices please see the [Invest NI Privacy Notice](#).

AUTOMATED DECISION MAKING

Automated decisions, based on responses to the online eligibility checker, will be carried out to assess the eligibility of an applicant to be issued with an application form.

We request that you ensure you select your responses to the eligibility checker carefully and accurately.

Applicants have the option to access a human review of an automated decision if they feel an automated decision has been wrongly made based on the information provided. To request a review on this basis please complete this [enquiry form](#) and a member of Invest NI's Business Support Team will contact you. The Business Support Team can also be contacted by telephone on 0800 181 4422.

SUBSIDY CONTROL / STATE AID

ATG | SW is Selective Financial Assistance. As such it operates in accordance with the Subsidy Control Principles of the UK-EU Trade & Cooperation Agreement including, where appropriate Commission Regulation (EU) No 651/2014 – the General Block Exemption Regulation.

GENERAL ENQUIRIES

If you have any enquiries about support available to your business, outside of the ATG programme, please complete this [enquiry form](#) and a member of Invest NI's Business Support Team will contact you. The Business Support Team can also be contacted by telephone on 0800 181 4422.