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UK

Business
Connect

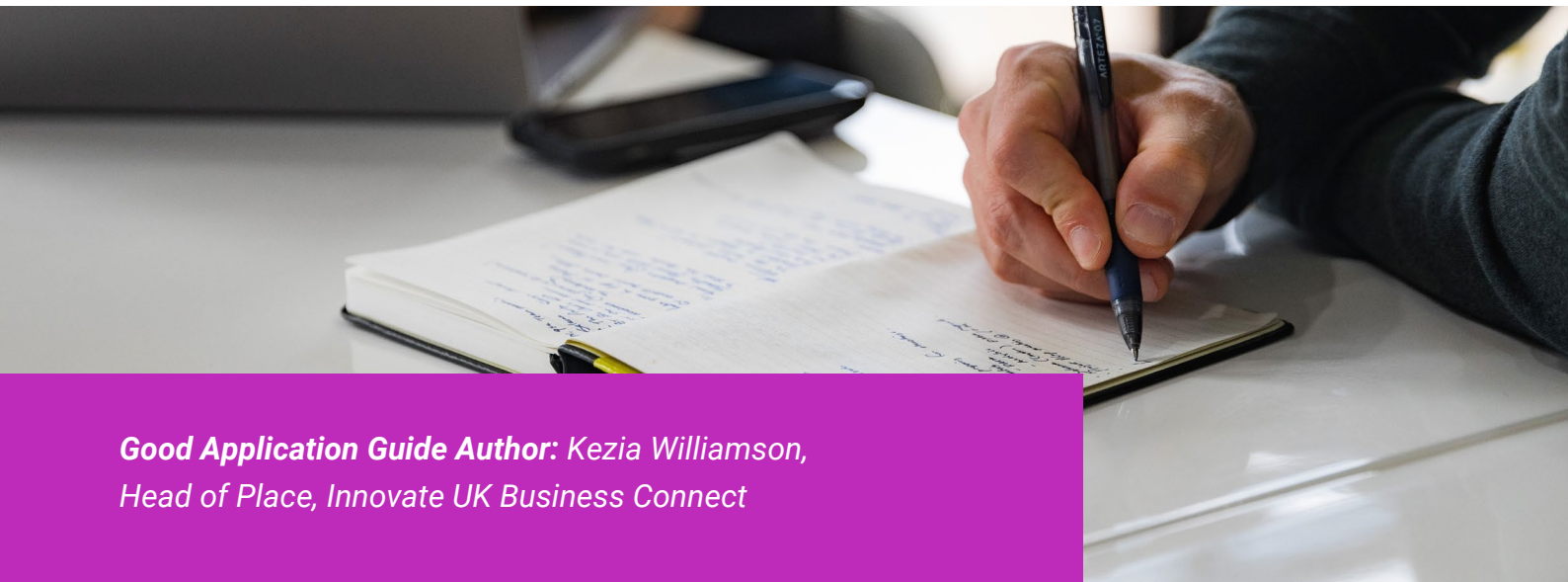
Good Application Guide

This guide will help you prepare
the best application you can for
Innovate UK competitions



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Introduction

This short guide will help you prepare the best application you can for Innovate UK competitions by:

- 1** Highlighting what to include in an application
- 2** Making clear what an assessor is looking for
- 3** Providing you with our 'Top 10 tips'

This guide has been produced by Innovate UK to supplement the official Innovate UK Guidance for Applicants (GfA). You should always read the GfA and other Innovate UK documentation relating to the competition to which you are applying. In addition to the content of this guide, Innovate UK can support you by providing independent, objective feedback and advice on your application. Make sure you contact us in plenty of time before the deadline to get the most from the support available.

Most of the Innovate UK funding programmes follow a similar application

format and you should bear in mind that the questions are designed to help rather than trip you up. It is important that you answer the questions asked and cover all aspects the GfA describes. You should try to use the language they are looking for. The easier you make it for the assessor to understand and check off the information they seek, the more likely the proposal will score highly.

While the guide has been produced with Innovate UK programmes in mind, the advice is transferable to most grant funding applications.



General advice for funding applications

Keep in mind the priorities of the funding agency. What projects are they looking for and what are their key investment criteria?

Avoid starting by trying to explain how great your idea is or how clever the technology is. The first part is about setting the context for the market need and how it will be addressed – this must be laid out in as compelling and logical a way as possible. Remember the importance of a good first impression – those first few sentences are critical so you need to make them interesting and exciting to create positive momentum throughout the rest of the application. In essence, there are four fundamental questions considered by Innovate UK before making their investment decision:

- 1 Is it a big enough market?** Does it represent value for money compared to the investment requested?
- 2 Can the innovation be world leading?** Is the idea sufficiently distinctive and strong to be successfully exploited in the UK and globally?
- 3 Is it at the right stage of development?** It must be market driven, rather than predominantly a research project.
- 4 Why should public money be used?** Why not use company funds or raise additional finance via venture capital (VC) investment or a bank loan?

Business Connect Support

We are grant funded to provide independent, objective feedback and advice on your application. If you are unsure of anything or just want a friendly chat about how you can improve your proposal then please get in touch.

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Key Features of a Good Application



This guidance is not structured to reflect the order of the questions in the Innovate UK application form. It is more a summary of what makes a good proposal than a list of the questions in the application form. Always refer to the GfA for details of the questions you need to answer on the application form.

Remember that each section on the application form has a list of key information that should be supplied. A tip when checking an application is to have someone else go through the application and check that the text in each section covers the required topics.

A top-level summary can also be found towards the end of this guide.

The key features of a good proposal are:

- 1 Alignment to the competition scope**
- 2 A clear demonstration of innovation**
- 3 A strong business case**
- 4 A convincing value proposition**
- 5 A credible plan for research and development**
- 6 The right consortium**
- 7 A clear need for support**
- 8 The right kind of risk**

Above all, make sure you write an application that excites and inspires!

The following content will go into more detail about what you should include and how you should focus your application. This guide complements the GfA and should not be used in isolation.



01 Alignment to the competition scope

This may seem obvious, but alignment to the scope is the most important thing to get right.

If the assessors don't think the project is in scope they will reject it. It doesn't matter how strong you've made the rest of the application. Don't waste a lot of time and effort writing an application if you're not sure that it's a good fit.

Read the briefing document carefully and check with the competition help desk if you are in any doubt to make sure you are in scope before you start.

Once you've checked your project is in scope, think carefully about the best way to present your case. Be very clear and specific about how your project fits the scope – don't leave anything to guesswork by the evaluators.

Use clear language, refer to the terminology used in the brief and keep it simple. Project assessors are not necessarily experts in your specific sector so you should avoid acronyms and highly technical language where possible.

For support please contact us at:
support@iuk.ukri.org





02 Innovation

Innovation should be at the heart of any Innovate UK application.

Innovation in this context is not about incremental improvements, but delivering step changes to sectors. That can mean developing something completely new or applying an existing technology to a new sector. Innovations can be technical (pushing the boundaries of a technology or applying it to a new problem) or commercial (addressing a need in a novel way).

You also need to show that you have the freedom to operate in your chosen sector and geographies. Evidence to support this can include results of patent searches, literature surveys and competitor analyses. Remember to describe the current intellectual property (IP) situation and how will you protect IP arising from the project. The Intellectual Property Office (IPO) has useful resources for companies on [protecting your IP](#).

Make it clear to the assessor how your project improves on the current solution, and use language to make the innovation easy to identify. Without making wild, unsubstantiated claims, you need to make sure that your idea is genuinely novel and that it doesn't come across as too incremental or inconsequential. Timeliness is an important factor here; many exciting technologies don't realise their potential because the market isn't ready for them, so make sure you convince the assessors that this is the right time for this project.

Beyond the market as a whole, how will the project enhance your offering and make you more competitive? What are the outputs of the project and can the innovation be enabling and underpinning: i.e. does it have the potential to drive improvements in multiple applications across a wide scope?

A night cityscape featuring several illuminated skyscrapers, with the most prominent being the Petronas Towers. The scene is overlaid with numerous vertical lines of varying colors (blue, purple, pink) that extend from the bottom of the frame towards the top, each ending in a small, glowing sphere. The background is a dark, deep blue sky.

03 A strong business case

Above all, the assessor is looking to understand the need and customer demand. What is the problem you are addressing? Is it a credible business opportunity? The heart of your business case must be focused on how you will make money from the idea, placed in the context of the market opportunity and market size.

An ideal response explains why that market need exists (what is driving it) and what is required to meet it before describing how it will be addressed. This robust link between your proposed solution and its commercial outcomes must be spelt out. Poor responses talk too much about the solution without first describing the issue.

The assessor is looking to see whether you understand the potential market for your project. The best responses use current market data references (try to avoid wildly optimistic projections!) and describe the wider picture before focusing on the market share expected for your solution. The dynamics of the market are also important. Is it growing? How fast? What trends affect it? What is the competition? What are the barriers to entry?

Once this has been made clear, you must outline your strategy to access the market. The assessor wants to see if this is realistic. If you cannot explain how your product will be made, who will retail it, or your sales/ service model, you will be marked down.

You should also be upfront about any legislative or regulatory issues, current or foreseeable, that may affect your ability to access a market.

Don't claim too much – the assessor knows what is possible and as far as return on investment is concerned, wants to see if the investment of public funding is value for money. Make sure your projections for growth and market share are robust

and on a realistic timescale. If you are proposing a collaborative project this is an ideal opportunity to talk about the role of each of the project partners. For example, having a downstream retailer or a supplier in the project can really add weight to your exploitation plans.

Essentially, the detail you provide here supports your claims of market capture and the assessor is trying to establish whether it is likely to succeed. A badly defined market opportunity can often come undone at this point, with the assessor wary that your proposed project is more 'technology push' than 'market pull'.



04 A convincing value proposition

It is a truism that people don't buy technology, they buy what technology does for them. The success of any innovation, therefore, depends ultimately on human motivations and behaviour.

This reality can represent a risk for organisations seeking to exploit innovative technologies, as even the most cutting-edge technology will fail if potential customers see no benefit or are unable to use it effectively. By taking its inspiration from human behaviour, design not only mitigates that risk, but leverages opportunities to create more value through outstanding customer experiences.

Using high-quality design at the start of a project can help businesses to:

- better understand their customers and end-users and, in so doing, create more desirable and fit-for-purpose products, services and processes.
- develop more sustainable solutions and increase business resilience.
- reduce innovation risk, timescales and cost.

- differentiate their offerings in competitive markets.
- identify and open up new markets.
- communicate ideas and collaborate more effectively.
- become more investor-ready.
- strengthen their brand – increasing awareness, loyalty and advocacy among customers.

For more help on how design led thinking can help your project, please refer to the [Innovate UK Business Connect Design in Innovation Guide](#).

Using design thinking to work on your value proposition before you even think about writing your funding application is recommended. It can help you refine your business case, exploitation plans and even inform who you should collaborate with. There are lots of tools available online to help, for example, the [Value Proposition Canvas](#) from Strategyzer.

Human/customer considerations are often lacking from technology-enabled innovations, leading to less successful propositions so make sure you consider:

- who your target customers or end users are.
- whether your product or service is desirable in the context of their specific motivations and aspirations.
- if it is easy to adopt (i.e. is behaviour change required and if so, how will you achieve this?).
- if it fulfils a genuine need.
- if it is easy to use.

Do not underestimate the inertia barrier. Think about all the technology that is currently available versus how much use is made of it. It is often preferable to stick with the status quo even if a better solution exists, because it is a known pain versus an unknown potential gain. Even a small amount of learning or behaviour change can be a sufficient deterrent to new technology uptake.

A convincing value proposition should include benefits for all the project partners as well as stakeholders outside the project. Be sure to check the competition GfA for any specific criteria about who should benefit from your project. The applications that do well go beyond restating the commercial benefits of the idea, and also emphasise the ways in which others might benefit.

Given that these are public funds, it is important to demonstrate that the project will be helping more than just the proposer. You must provide benefits in all categories and explain how these can be achieved by your business strategy. The key categories are:

- economic benefits
- social benefits
- environmental benefits
- regional benefits



Economic benefits: To your customers, your supply chains and the broader sector – perhaps through exports, raised visibility of the sector or competitiveness of the UK.

Social benefits: These can include regional benefits, in terms of local employment and cluster growth; customer benefits in terms of quality of life, education, empowerment etc; employee benefits such as safer working environment, skill development etc.

Environmental benefits: This can cover emissions (to air, water and ground), raw material consumption (including water), energy efficiency, biodiversity, waste avoidance, recycling, or more sustainable business models or consumer behaviour.

Regional benefits: These may include some of the economic, social and environmental benefits where these have a regional bias. Will your project help raise the profile of your region for a particular sector and deliver other knock-on benefits? Think big as well as small – from local to global impacts.

In all cases, don't ignore the potential negative impacts. These should be detailed and their mitigation/minimisation described or justified. If the assessor judges that your project is potentially damaging and that you haven't considered this, it will negatively impact your score.





05 A credible R&D plan

It is important to explain what you will do in the project – i.e. how you will address the critical success factors described in your business opportunity.

The assessor wants to understand the technical approach and although they tend to be knowledgeable in your sector, you should not assume familiarity with all the technical aspects. Avoid jargon and acronyms, and break down the project into key work packages and milestones.

This suggested format is useful to ensure you include all the relevant information clearly and concisely:

Work Package No. & Name, Partners involved, Timeline (e.g. M0-12), Description of Activity, Milestone

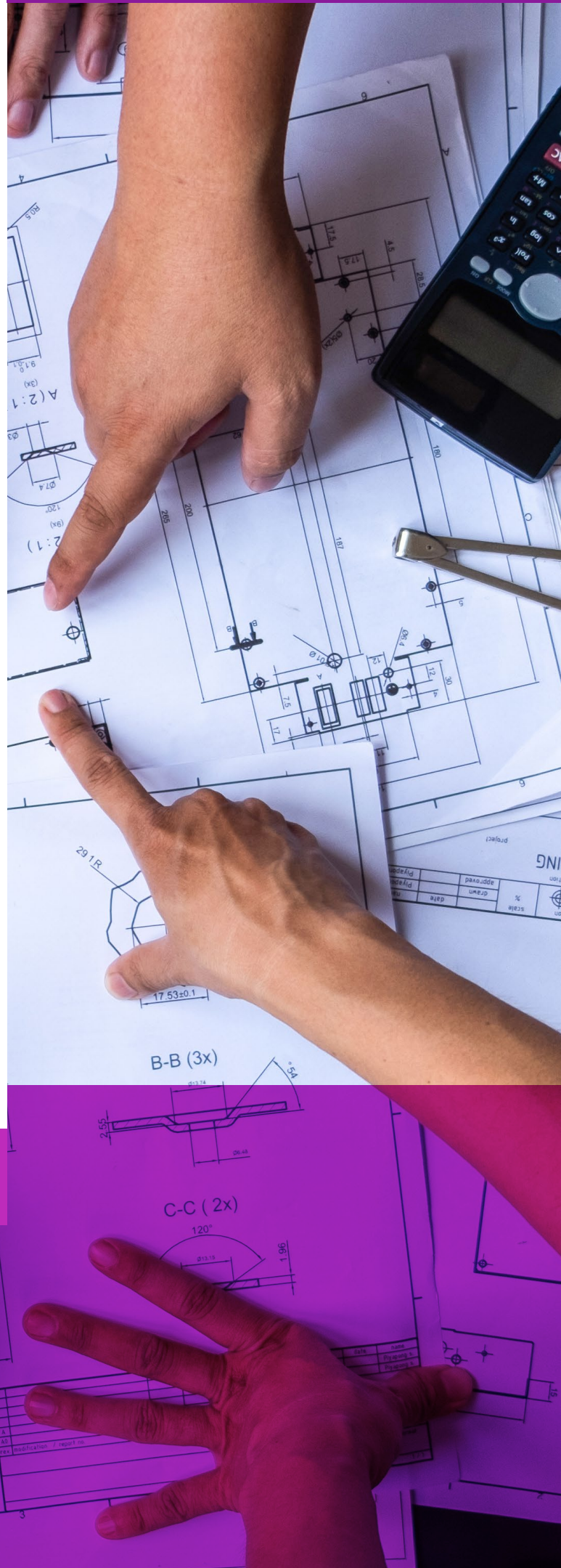
The project is best summarised in a Gantt chart (included as an appendix) with each task explained. Provide an appropriate level of detail – a handful of tasks is too little, but breaking down every week is too much. The tasks should be clear on resource allocation, cost and interdependency with other tasks.

This response shouldn't be treated any differently to most internal project plans. The assessor is looking to see if the plan is realistic, whether there is sufficient resource (and where it is coming from) and if management will be an issue. Make clear the reporting lines, especially with multiple sub-contractors or partners.

The assessor is looking to see if the plan will achieve on the project objectives and will have considerable project management experience so make sure it is clear and all adds up!

A strong proposal clearly identifies what the exact scope, deliverables and exploitations of the funded project will be, as well as the longer term scope, deliverables and exploitations beyond the funded element of the project. The proposal you are writing is unlikely to take the project to the ultimate end goal of product/service commercialisation, but you will still talk about this in terms of your market opportunity etc. Be clear what the project will deliver and acknowledge the further steps required to achieve commercialisation.

Strong proposals include details about the immediate opportunity after completing a successful project including getting project approvals from a board of directors or getting further public/private investment for detailed designs or proof-of-concept work. Doing this can also help strengthen your risk analysis, for example, including risks around potential time to markets, shifts/changes in business focus and/or markets and potential competitors.






06 The right consortium

It's the old cliché, an A class team can make a B class product a success, but a B class team won't necessarily succeed, even with an A class product. Your proposal is therefore as much about convincing the assessor that you are the right team for the job as it is about presenting a ground breaking innovation project. Whether you are applying as a single company or a large consortium, it's about demonstrating that the project will proceed as described and will be likely to deliver the intended outcomes after the project has ended.

Remember that route to market and exploitation are as important as the product/service development aspects. Many projects fall down on the route to market aspect and don't demonstrate that they have engaged likely customers or manufacturers. The assessor wants to understand if the project partners have the skills, experience, resource and facilities to carry out the project AND exploit the results themselves.

What does the perfect consortium look like? It's a common question, but there is no magic formula for the ideal number of partners in a successful project. It is all about what is right for the particular project you are proposing. If you need 10 partners or one it doesn't matter as long as you can justify it.

One aspect here is why a sub-contractor or partner has been included – what value are they bringing and is it core to the delivery of the project? Make sure all partners have an active role and that there are no 'passengers' along for the journey. One part of this is to demonstrate how each partner will benefit from the project. A common issue we see is project partners included in the consortium, but not mentioned throughout the bulk of the proposal. If a partner is actively involved they should be mentioned each step of the way – in the benefits, in the technical approach, in the business case etc.



If you have gaps in your team, don't ignore them and hope no one notices. Be upfront about the gaps and explain your plan to fill them. You should also include this within your risk mitigation strategy.

Remember to use the appendix to provide additional details about your partners. You get half an A4 page per partner in Innovate UK applications, so make sure you list the most relevant experience and evidence of success.

Need help finding collaborators?

We can help you identify and connect with the most appropriate partners for your project.

With a reach of 300,000* innovators via our networks across industry, academia and intermediaries, together with our in-depth sector knowledge, we connect innovators with new partners and new opportunities beyond their existing thinking – accelerating ambitious ideas into real-world solutions.

*Source: Innovate UK Business Connect Customer Relationship Management system.



07 A clear need for support

Essentially you are explaining why public money should be used on your project.

Ideally by now you will have described such a compelling and exciting project that you yourself will start to wonder why it even needs public help! So, you need to explain why you can't afford it (perhaps your R&D budget is already committed elsewhere) and then show why commercial finance isn't available.

The kind of answer that assessors are looking for here usually relates to risk i.e. it is too risky for commercial investors; hence Innovate UK funds could help to get through this stage of development.

Other important factors include: reducing the time to market in order to get there ahead of competitors, to increase the amount of R&D taking place in the UK or to facilitate a new R&D collaboration.

08 The right kind of risk



The one thing to remember here is: risk is not a bad thing!

One of the most common mistakes we see in applications is an understating of the risk in a project. The instinct for a company is commonly to play down the risk and portray the project as a sure thing in order to convince the assessors that it will succeed and therefore must be supported. In fact rating the risks overall as low will mark down your score – the question arises why you need public support to de-risk the project if it is already low risk.

For a radically innovative project, risk is likely to be high and Innovate UK appreciates this. Of course, there are different kinds of risk and a 'good' risk for a proposal might be technical risk i.e. you are not sure if the technology will work. You mitigate this risk by having a great team and the right resources i.e. if anyone can make it work it will be you. 'Bad' risks would include poor management, a weak consortium, a poorly defined route to market etc.

Ensure you undertake a complete risk assessment across all the categories listed. Many proposals ignore or give scant attention to commercial and environmental risks and are marked down because of it. You must describe mitigation strategies for each identified risk (and rate each one). This is not about coming up with reasons for why this risk isn't a problem, but rather a strategy you will follow to minimise and control the risk.

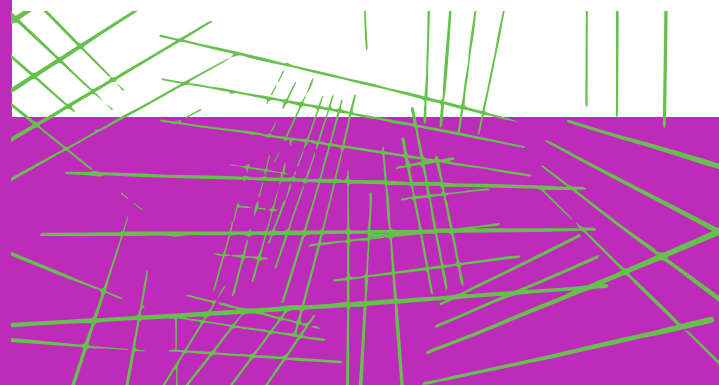
Risk, Rating (High, Medium, Low), Impact, Mitigation

Best practice is to provide a table in the appendix. For example:



Risk	Probability	Impact	Rating	Mitigation	Rating after Mitigation	Owner
E.g. Project partner pulling out	1 - Low	1 - Low	Probability x impact	Consortium agreement already in place, regular project meetings planned, good network of contacts, interest from other parties.	1 - Low	E.g. Project manager
	2 - Med	2 - Med	1 - Low		2 - Med	
	3 - High	3 - High	2,4 - Med 3,6,9 - High		3 - High	

Commercial risks may include losing partners/sub-contractors, staff, changes in market or raw materials costs etc. Environmental risks could include generation of new waste streams or emissions, increased energy use or demand from users.



Top tips for grant applications

- 1 Fit within scope**

Make sure your project is within the remit for the competition – details can be found in the Briefing Document.
- 2 Agree key points with partners**

Get started on your outline project plan and Consortium Agreement as soon as possible – who will do what and who will own what when it comes to IP?
- 3 Be clear and concise**

You don't have much space, so make every word count and avoid overly technical language.
- 4 Make a realistic plan**

Remember if you get the funding you will have to do the work so don't write yourself into a corner.
- 5 Be convincing**

Why do you need the money? Ask yourself – would you invest?
- 6 Remember risk and innovation**

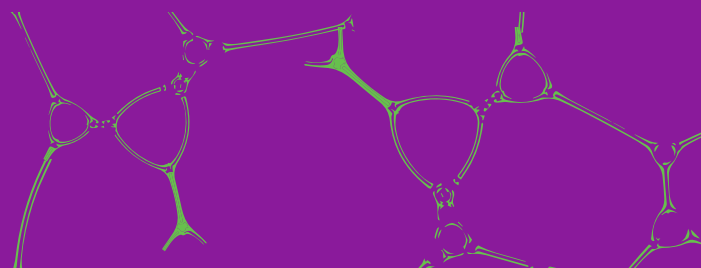
Projects need sufficient quantities of both to be eligible for Innovate UK funding.
- 7 Quantify and justify assertions**

Provide numbers and evidence where possible to back up your claims.
- 8 Excite and inspire**

Stand out from the crowd and make sure your first few paragraphs are particularly strong as that first impression counts.
- 9 Get advice and feedback from Innovate UK**

We can provide independent, objective feedback and advice. Contact us early in the application process to get the most value out of our expertise.
- 10 Don't leave it too late to ask questions or submit!**

Remember that most Innovate UK competitions close at 11am, but you can upload and overwrite your application as many times as you like – only the last version will be evaluated.



A note on appendices

Make the most of the appendices. When it says, “you may submit an appendix” it is strongly advised that you do so. Appendices shouldn’t simply be longer responses to the application form questions, but rather be used to provide graphic summaries and add value to the text. Certainly you should avoid lots of back-up data or technical jargon.

Note the limits for appendices – assessors are instructed not to consider anything that goes beyond these, so don’t waste your time including additional content. You should also avoid including website links or any referral for the assessors to read more somewhere else, as assessors are instructed not to click links and only to assess based on the information provided.

Everything you need to convince the assessors should be included directly in your application form. You should not include vital information only in the appendices.

A final note is that there are recommendations about the names of the appendices in the GfA – you should follow the instructions.





Need more help?

Innovate UK is the UK's innovation network.

We connect businesses, value chains, entrepreneurs, innovators and investors, helping you to identify and develop the ideas, expertise and technologies, which have the potential to be world leading products, processes and services.

We can help you apply for funding:

- Advice on fit to competition scope
- Finding collaboration partners
- Competition availability
- Objective feedback on draft applications

Contact us to find out more:

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