

Tees Valley Investment Zone Innovation Vouchers

Applicant Overview and Guidance

1. What is the purpose of the programme

The Innovation Vouchers programme is designed to support ambitious digital and creative businesses in the Tees Valley to explore, develop, and accelerate innovative ideas that can contribute to business growth and wider economic impact. The vouchers are intended to help businesses move promising ideas forward, whether that means testing feasibility, building a prototype, piloting an innovation, or preparing for commercial rollout. The scheme supports innovation that strengthens business capability and benefits the wider Tees Valley ecosystem, including through new products, services, tools, content, experiences, workflows, and commercial opportunities.

2. Who should consider applying

This programme is aimed at businesses that can show a clear innovation opportunity and a credible plan for delivery.

Basic eligibility

Before an application can move to scored assessment, it will need to demonstrate:

- that the business is operating in, or can demonstrate a clear economic benefit to, the Tees Valley
- that the project aligns with the aims of the Innovation Vouchers programme and the relevant call theme
- that the proposal has a clear digital and/or creative innovation element
- that the business has the capacity to deliver the work and take forward the outcomes
- that the stage of the project is appropriate to the type of voucher being applied for

Scored assessment

Applications that meet the basic eligibility requirements will then be assessed on the strength of the proposal. Scored assessment will be based on the following weighted criteria:

- Technical Merit (40%)
- Market Potential (30%)
- Economic and Regional Impact (30%)

In practice, this means applications will be considered on factors including:

- the quality and distinctiveness of the digital and/or creative innovation project
- the specific business challenge or growth opportunity the project will address
- the realism of the route to market, adoption, or wider business benefit
- whether the voucher amount requested is proportionate to the size of the business and/or the growth potential that could be achieved through the project
- the potential value for the Tees Valley through growth, jobs, skills, productivity, partnerships, or wider spillovers



Applicants should make sure that the project is not described as general business-as-usual activity. The strongest applications will show why the activity is innovative, time-bound, and capable of delivering defined outputs and outcomes.

2. What voucher types are available

	Exploration Vouchers	Acceleration Vouchers
Purpose	Exploration Vouchers help Tees Valley SMEs test feasibility, validate assumptions and build the evidence needed for a larger innovation project. They are designed to de-risk early-stage ideas and create a clear pathway into larger voucher support.	Acceleration Vouchers provide support for advanced-stage innovation delivery, supporting projects that are ready to build, pilot, implement, or scale solutions that drive business growth and cluster capability.
Use cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market research to understand the market opportunity, customer needs, competitive landscape and best routes to market/channels • Feasibility studies and technical scoping • Early-stage prototyping and proof of concept • Testing, validation and iteration (including access to specialist equipment or facilities) • Technical consultancy and expertise to resolve specific innovation challenges • Customer discovery and user testing where it directly supports innovation delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced prototype building and piloting in operational environments • Product or process development, implementation and scale-up activity • Specialist facilities, equipment access, and technical delivery capacity • Activity that strengthens digital and creative capability and generates measurable economic impact
Amount	Up to £50,000	Up to £300,000

Match funding

Please note that the £50,000 and £300,000 figures refer to total project value, including the applicant's 20% match contribution. For example, a project with a total value of £50,000 would require a business contribution of £10,000, with £40,000 supported through the programme. A project with a total value of £300,000 would require a business contribution of £60,000, with £240,000 supported through the programme.

3. What themes can you apply under?



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The Innovation Vouchers call will prioritise investment in the Tees Valley’s key growth areas. Your project must fit clearly within one of the following themes, although strong applications may show links across more than one area.

Theme 1 (**AI for Innovation and New Products**) and Theme 2 (**Market Adoption, Commercialisation, and New Audience Reach**) are the programme’s priority areas and together will account for 80% of the available Innovation Voucher budget. The remaining 20% of the budget will be allocated to Theme 3 (**Digital and Creative Product Innovation**). This approach is intended to focus the majority of support on the areas where there is strongest strategic alignment and greatest potential for business growth, commercial traction, and wider impact across the Tees Valley digital and creative economy.

<p>Digital</p>	<p>Theme 1: AI for Innovation and New Products</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call statement: How might digital and creative businesses use AI to create genuinely new or improved products, services, and experiences, including new ways to create, personalise, and deliver value to customers and audiences? • Exploration examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ exploring novel AI-enabled concepts (for example new interactive formats, creative tools, personalised content journeys, intelligent features in digital products) ○ rapid proof-of-concept prototypes ○ testing with target users or audiences ○ market research to understand the opportunity, willingness to pay, and the best routes to market/channels ○ early partner discovery (platforms, studios, agencies, venues). • Acceleration examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ building and piloting AI-enabled products or features in real-world settings ○ integrating AI into customer-facing services or creative production pipelines ○ validating traction (users, engagement, revenue, partnerships) ○ iterating towards product-market fit preparing for scale (performance, reliability, commercial rollout).
<p>Creative</p>	<p>Theme 2: Market Adoption, Commercialisation, and New Audience Reach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call statement: How might digital and creative businesses use innovation to reach new audiences and customers, enter new markets, and accelerate market adoption and commercialisation through improved distribution, engagement, and monetisation? • Exploration examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ market research, segmentation and value proposition testing to identify new audiences/customers and priority use cases ○ competitor, channel and route-to-market analysis (including partnerships and platform strategies) ○ audience discovery, user testing and early validation of willingness to pay



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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o rapid proof-of-concept prototypes for engagement, personalisation, or new content/service formats o testing new distribution, licensing, pricing or monetisation models to evidence early commercial potential. • Acceleration examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o piloting and scaling go-to-market approaches with measurable adoption (new audience segments reached, new customers acquired, new markets entered) o implementing audience analytics, activation, and martech tools to support commercial rollout o personalisation at scale and optimisation of funnels (conversion, retention, engagement) o demonstrating traction and commercialisation outcomes (revenue growth, paid pilots, repeat customers, partnerships, exports where relevant).
<p>All</p>	<p>Theme 3: Digital and Creative Product Innovation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call statement: What high-potential digital or creative product innovation could you develop that drives business growth, strengthens digital and creative capability, and benefits the Tees Valley ecosystem? This may include new or improved digital products, platforms, tools, services, software, applications, or interactive solutions with clear commercial potential. • Exploration examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o exploring and defining a high-potential digital or creative product opportunity, including problem framing, user needs, and feasibility o developing early concepts, prototypes, or proof of concept versions of a product to test the core idea o user testing to validate demand, usability, and the strength of the proposition o market research to understand market size, customer demand, willingness to pay, and the best routes to market o partner discovery and collaboration building, for example with agencies, platforms, technology partners, venues or relevant supply chain partners. • Acceleration examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o piloting the product in a real-world setting and refining it based on feedback and evidence o further developing and improving the product for launch, adoption, or commercial rollout o validating traction through users, customers, sales, partnerships, or other evidence of commercial potential o preparing for scale, including delivery model, technical reliability, operational readiness, and routes to market o demonstrating measurable outcomes for the business and wider digital and creative ecosystem



	<p>Please note: this theme is not intended to support the development of new creative content IP, such as games, TV or film content, podcast content, or similar creative productions. Activity of that nature is expected to be supported through a separate mechanism intended for launch in Autumn 2026. However, product-led innovation that supports creative storytelling, digital tools, app development, interactive delivery, or other commercially viable digital and creative solutions may still be in scope where it fits the aims of this call.</p>
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4. Application process and timeline

The Innovation Vouchers process will run in two stages, starting with an Expression of Interest (EOI) and then, for shortlisted applicants, a full bid.

Stage	Date
Expression of interest applications open	1 May 2026
Expression of interest applications close	29 May 2026
Assessment of expression of interests	1 - 19 June 2026
Shortlisted applicants notified	22 June 2026
Full bid applications submitted by	10 July 2026
Assessment of full bids	13 - 31 July 2026
Vouchers awarded and projects can start from	3 August 2026
Projects must finish by	5 March 2027

Applicants should plan backwards from the project end date and make sure their delivery plan is realistic within the available period. Projects should be tightly scoped, with clear milestones and outputs that can be delivered within the funding window.

6. What information applicants will need to provide

Across the EOI and full application stages, applicants will be asked to provide information in five broad areas:

- **Business information:** organisation details, size, turnover and what the business does
- **Project information:** the voucher type, theme, summary of activity, what is innovative and why the project matters to the business
- **Milestones and delivery:** start and end dates, current stage and a chronological delivery plan
- **Costs and match funding:** the amount requested, total project cost and how the required 20% match funding contribution will be met
- **Outputs and impact:** what the project will deliver and what longer-term difference it is expected to make

For the full application, applicants should also expect to provide greater detail on risks, mitigation, intellectual property, procurement, and the financial breakdown using the template finance cost headings.

7. What assessors are likely to look for

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Applications will be checked against basic eligibility requirements and then scored more fully against technical merit, market potential and wider impact. In practical terms, applicants should make sure the proposal answers the following questions clearly:

- is the project clearly aligned to the Investment Zone's digital and/or creative priorities?
- is the project genuinely innovative, rather than routine delivery or standard business expansion?
- does the business understand the market opportunity, customer need or adoption challenge it is trying to address?
- is there a realistic and well-managed delivery plan with the right skills, partners and resources in place?
- can the business explain how the project could lead to growth, jobs, skills, productivity, commercialisation or wider regional benefit?

Strong applications will be specific, evidence-based and commercial in tone. Weak applications will be too vague, too broad, too technical without a market case, or too focused on ambition without showing how delivery will happen.

8. Application support

Applicants who need support in completing the expression of interest form or full application can email izteam@tees.ac.uk.

Please note that all applications are confidential and held under the Teesside University [data protection policy](#).