

# **Freight Innovation Accelerator Cohort 5 (2026-27)**

## Application Guidance

# 1. Introduction

The Freight Innovation Fund (FIF) Accelerator is funded by the Department for Transport (DfT) and delivered by Connected Places Catapult. It forms part of the wider [Freight Innovation Fund programme](#), which has been extended to April 2030 following the success of the first four years.

The programme is designed to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to develop and test greener and more efficient solutions for freight which address one of the programme challenges.

**Up to 12 SMEs will be selected to receive £10,000** each to develop a detailed trial proposal. **Up to 8 of those will then progress to the next stage, where they will each receive up to £100,000 to deliver their trial** via a pre-commercial Pilot and Trial contract. SMEs will be required to match-fund 30% of the total project costs.

The FIF Accelerator is looking for innovators with solutions that can address one of four challenge areas below. These challenges have been co-designed with our programme partners to ensure they reflect the needs and strategic priorities of the industry we serve.

**1. Challenge 1: Renewable Energy Supply**

Innovative ways to decarbonise and stabilise the energy supply of freight areas, such as depot and ports, effectively and affordably

**2. Challenge 2: Autonomy in Freight & Logistics**

Next generation of autonomous technologies that can support decarbonisation, safety and efficiency for the inter-modal freight sector and its logistics

**3. Challenge 3: Supply Chain Resilience**

Solutions that might support the industry shift towards innovation-enabled resilience-driven, adaptive systems

**4. Challenge 4: Open Challenge**

Innovations, technologies and solutions that aim at improving the impact on nature, efficiency and safety of inter-modal freight

This application guide will provide supporting information to help applicants complete and submit a high-quality application.

# 2. Eligibility

The Freight Innovation Fund Accelerator is open to micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in existing freight supply chains as well as companies looking to move into new sectors. [See the definition of company size here.](#)

Applicants must have the following:

- A registered UK company address.
- An innovative technology or solution at **Technology Readiness Level (TRL) 5 or above.** [We use Innovate UK's definitions of TRL.](#)
- Demonstrable alignment to one of the challenges being addressed by this programme.
- A willingness to travel on occasion to face-to-face meetings and events as required by the programme.
- A willingness to complete an 8-week trial of your solution in a real-world environment.
- Contribute 30% of the total project cost as matching fund with in-kind support (e.g., labour, materials).
- Be a micro, small or medium-sized enterprise (SME).
- Already operate in the freight sector or looking to bring your solution into freight space from another sector.

## Equity, Diversity & Inclusion

The Programme celebrates Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) not just because it is the right thing to do, but because it leads to better decisions, better innovation and makes our working life more rewarding and more productive. All partners are committed to fostering EDI in our workforce, our partners, suppliers, and innovators.

We hold EDI to include the characteristics outlined in the Equality Act 2010 (Age; Sex (and Gender); Race (and Ethnicity); Disability; Religion or belief; Sexual orientation; Gender reassignment; Marriage or civil partnerships; Pregnancy and maternity), but also other historic barriers to opportunity, such as “class”, nationality, education, and other forms of socio-economic exclusion.

The Programme is committed to the following EDI principles:

- Provide a level playing field for all innovators seeking to apply to participate in the Programme.

- Drive a human-centred approach when tackling real world challenges.
- Foster an open and inclusive environment for businesses joining the Programme.
- Offer advocacy and collaboration opportunities to reduce barriers to innovation.
- Encourage a range of perspective in our shortlisting and due diligence process by selecting diverse assessment panels.

We will be running an optional anonymous survey to track EDI characteristics of our applicants to help us with our commitment to fostering EDI in our workforce, our partners, suppliers, and innovators.

## 3. Application Guidance

### Anonymisation of applications

Connected Places Catapult is taking action to reduce unconscious bias in the recruitment process by introducing anonymised applications. We therefore ask you to **leave out information** that could allow the assessors to identify who you are. This may include the name of your company or product, the name of your team members etc.

### General Guidance

- Carefully read this guidance document before preparing your application.
- You can access the application form on our open call page [here](#).
- Only the information in your application form will be assessed as well as additional attachments where requested.
- Applications must be submitted by midday on June 1st. Late submissions will not be considered.
- Please keep within the maximum word counts noted in each of the sections of the application form. Any content that exceeds the word count limit will be disregarded.
- In addition to the information included in the application form, further guidance on what should be included in your response to the application form question is given below. You should also refer to the assessment scoring criteria section as that will help to maximise your score.
- Please ensure you have read and understood the terms and conditions set out on the website under the 'How to Apply' section.


## Images

To support your answers, you can include images using the option below. To maintain the integrity of the anonymisation process, please ensure that any images do not contain your company name, logo, or other identifying details. Any images that include such information will be removed prior to assessment.

### Solution

Please provide an overview of what your solution is, how it works and how it addresses the selected challenge(s). \*

ⓘ Please ensure that you anonymise your response in respect to company names (e.g we/our company).



400 words remaining

## Application Questions

### Section 1 – Business and Due Diligence

In section 1, we need to determine that applicants represent businesses that are:

- Registered and operational in the UK,
- Have a VAT number
- Active and currently trading and
- Committed to upholding equality and diversity practice.

Details such as your company name, website, and address will only be made visible after the anonymous application assessment is complete and the SMEs have been shortlisted.

We also ask for a brief company summary, which we may share with the partner organisations in the programme. Therefore, please do not disclose any sensitive or commercial information in your summary.

## **Programme Specific Questions**

This section of the application form asks you for more detail about your solution and company. The guidance below will give you more details regarding specific questions within this section.

**Technology Readiness Level** – It is helpful for us to see where your technology currently sits in its development. This will allow us to determine the level of support you may need to bring it to market and whether it is a good fit for this programme. **This programme is aimed at companies with TRL 5 or above. You will be asked to provide evidence of your submitted TRL level.**

**Solution** – Tell us all about your solution in this section, in layman’s terms. What is it, what does it do and how does it work? You should also include:

- How your solution addresses the selected challenge/s you are applying to
- How your solution could contribute to improvements within the freight sector.
- How your solution will impact your target end users

**Innovation** – For this question you need to provide a strong case for why and how your solution is innovative. Key things to consider:

- Does your solution apply existing technologies into new areas, is it about developing new technologies for existing areas or is it a completely novel approach?
- You should explain what solutions currently exist and how yours is different, i.e., your application must provide details of its competitive advantage over any existing solutions.
- Make sure you explain how your solution will advance and improve the current state of play within the industry and provide evidence of how or why your innovation or solution is likely to work.
- You should also tell us whether you have protected your IP through patents, copyright, or trademarks.

**Market understanding** – We would like you to describe your understanding of the market potential for your solution and provide a transparent description of any technical and commercial risks you foresee with your solution, including specific details on regulatory risks, supply chain risks, competition, and anything else you deem relevant.

**Traction** – In determining the validity of your solution, our assessment panel would like to see evidence of your commercial traction to date. If you can, please provide us with details of:

- Your existing customer base, including early adopters.
- Who your collaborators are, both past and present.
- Market commendation, such as grant funding paid, investment raised and/or letters of support.
- Successful proof of concepts and or trials already undertaken.

**Team** – You should describe the roles, skills, and relevant experience of the project team, including any sub-contractors. To maintain the anonymisation process, please avoid including the names of your team members in your application.

## **Section 2 - Trial Specific Questions**

Section 2 focuses on the detail of the trial you are proposing to deliver during the accelerator programme.

Please note that the programme is divided into two phases, and it is essential that your proposed trial is realistic and achievable within the defined timeframe.

A *trial* is defined as an intervention designed to test the performance, effectiveness, or sustainability of a product or service in a real-world context. Real world trialling should last a minimum of **8 weeks to qualify for the programme**.

## **Key Dates**

- **Mid-August to Early October 2026:** Trial Design (5 weeks)
- **October 2026:** Trial selection.
- **October 2026 to March 2027:** Trial Delivery (4 months)

**Trial Partners** – Your trial partner will be the organisations which you trial your solution with. There are two routes for selecting a trial partner:

- a. Applying with your own trial partner** – We welcome applications from SMEs who already have a partner in the freight sector who they would like to trial with.
- b. Being matched to a programme partner** – This route is for SMEs who do not have a trial partner. For this route, SMEs will be matched with one of the industry partners supporting the accelerator programme.

For this Cohort, the partners are:

- DFDS
- Port of Tyne
- Portsmouth International Port
- Shoreham Port
- Welch Group
- Wincanton
- Twentyforty

**Trial Summary** - Please provide a one paragraph summary explaining what you will be developing or testing and what the outcomes will be.

**Trial Design** – Please provide an indicative trial proposal. This will be refined in conjunction with Connected Places Catapult and the industry partner during the first phase of the programme. It is encouraged that you answer all bullet points below:

- The proposed timeline for development and deployment.
- How you plan to manage the project.
- The characteristics of the testing environment which you might require.
- The input that would be needed from stakeholders (for example, data, infrastructure, equipment etc).
- A list of datasets or data parameters that will be required to develop and trial your solution.
- Any deployment support you may require from CPC, partners and third parties.
- Key risks or challenges you foresee and the plan for risk mitigation.
- Please feel free to upload any supporting documentation.

**Expected Benefits, Impact and Evaluation** – Please tell us how you would go about evaluating the impact of your technology or solution, i.e., how you plan to measure its effectiveness. The benefits of your solution could be economic, social, environmental, regional, or a combination of these factors. How will you know that your technology has been impactful, and why is this important?

**Project Finances** –

You can receive £10,000 as grant funding to develop your trial proposal in phase 1.

If you are selected for phase 2, you can then invoice up to £100,000 including VAT for your trial delivery work on this programme. If successful for the second phase of the programme, SMEs are expected to contribute an additional **30% of the total project cost as matched funding**. For instance, if the overall project expenses amount to £100,000, you would need to provide £30,000 in matched funding. **Your Invoice for Phase 2 will be inclusive of VAT; please consider this when submitting your finances. You must be VAT registered to receive funding.**

Designed to be in-kind, the matching fund could include but is not limited to:

- Labour costs.
- Overheads.
- Materials costs.
- Capital usage (property, equipment, facilities, others).
- Subcontractor costs.
- Travel and subsistence costs.
- Other costs - Workshop/lab usage charge outs, training costs, preparation of technical reports, market assessment, licensing in new technologies and patent filing costs of new IP.

In the application form, you will be required to provide a detailed breakdown of the estimated costs for your proposed trial, clearly indicating how the budget will be allocated across each project phase.

Your proposal should demonstrate strong value for money. All cost information provided should be clearly explained and all rates must reflect fair market value. Sub-contractor and material costs should be justified. A reasonable daily rate for staffing should be provided, in cases where the rate is higher, please provide an explanation as to why the staff member is critical to the project (Column E).

As part of the programme, you will be required to evidence your in-kind match-funding. This can be provided in the form of a signed letter from your CEO, CTO, or a relevant senior executive, outlining the number of hours contributed by internal staff or detailing other eligible costs that will contribute to your match-funding commitment.

## 4. Assessment Scoring Criteria

After the competition deadline, only applications that meet the eligibility criteria and scope of the competition will be formally assessed. Connected Places Catapult reserves the right to declare applications as out of scope of the programme.

Applications that progress to the assessment stage will be reviewed by at least three expert assessors from Connected Places Catapult. You should write clearly in layman's terms, avoiding acronyms and obscure jargon.

This section details the six criteria our assessors will use when scoring your application. Under each criterion there is a maximum score of five available.

- Solution & Innovation.
- Trial Proposal.
- Trial Feasibility.
- Impact.
- Market & Traction.
- Team.

Following the initial assessment, several applicants will be shortlisted for interview. Interviews will take place from June 29 – July 17, 2025. With regret, we will be unable to accommodate individual requests for interview slots. Interview guidance will be provided ahead of time.

## Notification of the Assessment Outcome

Only applicants who progress to the Interview stage will receive written feedback. Connected Places Catapult reserves the right to declare applications unsuccessful and out of scope. Once the selection decisions have been made, we regret that we are unable to offer follow up meetings or further feedback to unsuccessful applicants.

If you are successful, you will be sent a New Supplier Form, Terms and Conditions Agreement, Invoice, and Statement of Expenditure form that you must sign and return, along with any additional documentation that is requested within stated timelines.

There will be an **Application Support Webinar on May 7 at 10 am**, where Connected Places Catapult and DfT will give more details about the scope of the programme.

## 5. Project Reporting

### Trial Plan

The initial two months of the programme will be dedicated to SMEs for the development of their trial plan. By mid-October, we anticipate that you will have prepared a comprehensive trial plan outlining the specifics of your technology or solution development and testing strategy. The proposal should be written and presented to a professional standard and suitable for non-specialists, with all acronyms and unavoidable technical language clearly explained.

Once trial plans have been developed, Connected Places Catapult, the Programme Partners, and the Department for Transport will jointly select up to 8 SMEs to progress to the trial delivery phase.

### Progress and Final Reporting

The trial delivery stage will be from October 2026 through to mid-March 2027. Please consider this in your conversations with partners. Throughout the programme you will be required to provide monthly progress reports highlighting opportunities, issues, and risks. At the half-way trial delivery point, you will be expected to deliver an interim report. At the end of your project delivery period, you will be expected to provide a final report detailing your outcomes, impact, and futures exploitation plans. There will also be a survey for you to complete which asks about your experience of participating in the programme.

### Financial Reporting

Please keep evidence of project costs, as these will be required at the end of the programme. You will also be required to provide evidence (e.g. invoices, receipts) of match funding.

Only fees incurred between project start and end date will be paid.

## 6. Funding rules and payment schedule

- For Phase 1 (Trial Design), Connected Places Catapult will be procuring the services for the programme **under a Grant Funding Agreement**.
  - This funding will be given as grant funding, therefore will be subject to Minimum Financial Assistance (MFA). MFA requires you not to have received more than £315,000 in public funding within the last 2-3 financial years, including the current one
  - You will receive a Statement of Grant Usage document to complete before payment can be released
- **For Phase 2 (Pilot and Trial Delivery), Connected Places Catapult will be procuring the services as a Pre-Commercial Contract.** Once the contract has been signed, Connected Places Catapult will provide you with a Purchase Order number which must be clearly noted on all invoices.
  - You must be VAT registered to receive Phase 2 funding. The total funding offered is inclusive of VAT (ie, up to £100,000 inclusive of VAT). Please include the appropriate VAT number on the face of the invoice.
  - An invoice and a statement of expenditure will have to be provided for each payment to be released.
- **Payment schedule:**
  - **Trial Design Phase:** £10,000 at the end of the Trial Design Phase.
    - Release of payment is contingent on submission of the Statement of Grant Usage and associated receipts
  - **Trial Delivery Phase:** Up to £100,000 (including VAT)
    - 60% of their funding will be paid at the start of the trial delivery phase.
    - 40% of their funding at the end of the programme.
      - Release of the final payment is contingent upon receipt of an End of Programme Report, Survey, and attendance at Exit Interview.

All payments will be processed within 30 days of receiving a complete and accurate documentation and corresponding evidence.

## 7. Dates and Deadlines

Please note the dates and deadlines for the competition below. These are indicative timings; we will adhere to this schedule as best as possible. The closing date for applications is fixed and will be midnight on **May 31st**.

**Applications submitted after the deadline will not be considered.**

Competition opens	April 22
Application Support Webinar	10:00, May 7
Competition closes (application deadline)	12:00, June 1
Notification to shortlisted applicants	June 19
Interviews	29 June - 1 July: Technical and Business Due Diligence 7-9 July: Commercial Due Diligence Interviews
Feedback provided to unsuccessful applicants	August 7
Welcome Day	August 18

## 8. Contact Details

If you have any questions about the programme, please get in touch with our team via email – [FreightInnovationFund@cp.catapult.org.uk](mailto:FreightInnovationFund@cp.catapult.org.uk)

We wish you luck with your application!