

NESCA Innovation Fund

Assessment Criteria: A Guide for Applicants

Applicant scoring guide · Round 3 · Based on the NESCA Innovation Fund Reviewer Guidance, March 2026

How this guide works

Each application is scored 1–5 across seven criteria by three independent reviewers, at least one of whom is non-academic. The panel then decides: **Fundable / Fundable with revisions / Not Fundable**. This guide sets out what a score of 5 (Excellent) looks like for each criterion, so you can check your application against the same standard reviewers use.

Proposals are anonymised before review. Keep references to yourself and co-leads to a minimum within the body of the proposal to avoid potential bias.

★ **C6 — Regional North East impact is critical. A proposal that does not demonstrate credible regional North East impact cannot be recommended as Fundable regardless of scores in other criteria.**

	Criterion	Score 5 — Launch-pad	Score 5 — Lift-off
C1	Alignment, understanding of need and background research	Full understanding; state of art considered; builds on prior work; well-aligned with NESCA	Compelling motivation; state of art in depth; market need evidenced through direct engagement with stakeholders or customers; seamlessly aligned with NESCA
C2	Value for money and timeliness	Good value for money; well-justified; efficient; impacts exceed costs	Good value for money; comprehensive justification; impacts significantly exceed funding
C3	Co-creation and partnerships	Clear interest; letters provided; follow-on potential	High co-creation; robust commitment; substantial contributions
C4	Project plan and risk management	Clear feasible plan; risks identified	Detailed professional plan; comprehensive risk register with mitigations
C5	RRI, EDI, sustainability and Trusted Research	Good RRI awareness proportionate to scope; impacts identified; EDI embedded; sustainability considered; TR complete	Comprehensive RRI across all principles; EDI integrated with specific actions; sustainability embedded; TR fully compliant with mitigations
C6 ★	Progression, outcomes and regional impact	Clear regional benefit; strong stepping stone to Lift-off or external funding; outputs defined; regional benefits explained; convincing follow-on plan	Clear regional benefit; compelling impact; transformative improvements; credible pathways; strong stepping stone; sustainable beyond project
C7	IP management and route to market or impact	IP position understood; clear next steps; initial understanding of market/customers (commercial) or target stakeholders (policy/societal); realistic pathway ahead	Comprehensive IP plan with ownership and protection strategy; freedom to operate confirmed; validated market; clear route to market; business model considered. Policy: landscape analysed; stakeholders engaged. Societal: beneficiaries and delivery clear. Benefits quantified



What reviewers consider for each criterion

Use the points below as a checklist when writing your application.

<p>C1 — Alignment, understanding of need and background research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compelling motivation from users or problem owners • Understanding of need, market or policy driver • State of the art considered • Builds on previous work • Beneficiaries identified; TRL appropriate • Research quality demonstrated • Aligned with a NESCA theme; translation focus 	<p>C2 — Value for money and timeliness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Costs appropriate to scope and well justified • Staff allocation realistic; equipment over £500 itemised • Subcontractors justified and explained • Timeline realistic • Anticipated impacts exceed the funding requested • No ineligible costs included
<p>C3 — Co-creation and partnerships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner is suitable for the project • Letters of support are signed, dated, and on headed paper • Partner contributions are quantified (cash or in-kind) • Roles clearly defined; knowledge exchange mechanisms described • Follow-on potential evidenced • For spin-outs: market or user engagement replaces partnership 	<p>C4 — Project plan and risk management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear objectives and milestones • Work packages described with dependencies • Team roles defined; capacity to deliver demonstrated • Risks identified with likelihood, severity and mitigation • Contingency considered; regulatory and ethical constraints addressed
<p>C5 — RRI, EDI, sustainability and Trusted Research</p> <p>RRI — assess against all four principles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipate: intended and unintended impacts identified • Reflect: purposes, implications and uncertainties considered • Engage: plans for stakeholder dialogue throughout the project • Act: feedback will influence the project direction <p>EDI: inclusive culture; barriers removed; team support; ECR opportunities; accessible outputs</p> <p>Sustainability: proportionate to scope; sustainable travel; materials, energy and waste considered; lifecycle thinking applied to outputs and outcomes</p> <p>Trusted Research: checklist complete; due diligence conducted; legislation and dual-use considered/addressed</p>	<p>C6 ★ — Progression, outcomes and regional impact CRITICAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Builds on completed research with realistic TRL progression • Outputs, outcomes and impacts clearly defined with realistic timelines • Value proposition clear; partner benefits explained <p>Regional impact in the North East must cover at least one of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic: jobs, business growth, investment, supply chain • Skills: capacity building, knowledge transfer • Innovation: technology adoption, new products or services • Policy/Practice: policy influence or practice change • Knowledge Exchange: strengthened regional partnerships • Follow-on: pathway to further funding; clear next steps
<p>C7 — IP management and route to market or impact</p> <p>Consider: IP ownership clear; IP strength and resilience; freedom to operate; differentiation from competitors; commercial potential; route to market or impact pathway; readiness level change; socio-economic benefits; technical and security risks; translation focus.</p> <p>Commercialisation projects: business model considered; validated market; route to market clear. Policy projects: landscape analysed; stakeholders engaged. Societal projects: beneficiaries and delivery pathway clear. Benefits quantified.</p>	

Key reminders — drawn directly from the reviewer guidance

- ✗ Only research translation is fundable. Fundamental research (TRL 1) is not supported.
- ✗ PI time is not fundable unless the PI is an ECR.
- ✗ Applications that read like redrafted research proposals are unlikely to succeed. The underpinning research should already be completed.
- ✓ Policy research or other impact activities are eligible — not just commercialisation projects.
- ✓ Spin-outs may apply without an external partner but must evidence engagement with potential customers or end users.



✓ All applicants must complete in-house RRI training or attend a NESCA online RRI webinar before submitting the RRI section.
Questions? NESCA@northumbria.ac.uk · northumbria.ac.uk/NESCA · Full guidance at northumbria.ac.uk/NESCA