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An Roinn
Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe

Department of
Fairmin, Environment
an' Kintra Matthers

Sustainable Agriculture Programme

INNOVATION PARTNERSHIPS SCHEME BROCHURE

2026

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1 INTRODUCTION

The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) is seeking applications from groups of farmers, working in partnership with industry experts, to deliver innovative projects that address a challenge, issue or opportunity facing the Agri-Food Industry in Northern Ireland. This document explains how the scheme will operate.

The Innovation Partnerships scheme is part of the Farming for Sustainability – Innovation Programme.

CAFRE, as part of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), is responsible for delivering the Innovation Partnership scheme. The scheme will bring together individuals with complementary expertise to establish Operational Groups and develop their innovative ideas. Once formed, these Groups will be eligible to apply for funding to implement the projects outlined in their action plans.

An important part of the Innovation Partnerships scheme is the sharing of findings, and Operational Groups will be required to share the results of their projects to the industry within Northern Ireland.

2 WHAT FUNDING IS AVAILABLE?

Funding will be available for:

- i) **Establishment of an Operational Group (Stage 1)**. This funding is designed to bring expertise together to consider how practical solutions might be developed to address a particular problem or opportunity facing the Agri-Food Industry in Northern Ireland. Funding will help each group to appoint an Innovation Broker who will facilitate this process and help the group develop an action plan.

Funding will be awarded for to up to 14 Operational Groups at this stage.

- ii) **Implementation of the project action plan (Stage 2)**. This funding is designed to assist Operational Groups deliver the action plan developed at Stage 1.

In 2026 Funding will be awarded for to up to seven Operational Groups. It is anticipated that there will be further tranches in future years.

- iii) **Capital expenditure associated with the implementation of the project action plan**. Capital funding is also available to Operational Groups to support the implementation of the action plan. Capital funding is only available to groups who have been awarded Stage 2 funding and have identified the need for capital expenditure in their action plan.

3 HOW MUCH FUNDING IS AVAILABLE?

At stage 1, Establishment of an Operational Group, a lump sum¹ grant of £6,500 is available. This lump sum becomes payable once the Operational Group submits a stage 2 application. At stage 2, implementation of the project action plan, a grant of up to £150,000 is available at a grant rate of 100%.

Operational Groups will have the opportunity to apply for up to £15,000 of additional funding at the mid-point of their project if the need is identified. For example, if the need for additional work is established, or if there are significant inflationary pressures that were unforeseen at the application stage.

There is also £40,000 of grant available for capital expenditure at a grant rate of 50%. This means £80,000 of eligible expenditure would need to be made to draw down all the capital grant available. The minimum cost of each individual capital item is £5,000.

A lump sum¹ is being used at stage 1 to reduce the administrative burden on new Operational Groups. The lump sum will not be directly linked to expenditure incurred and will be paid provided a full and complete stage 2 application is made and all the conditions in the stage 1 Letter of Offer are met. This means that the Operational Group will need to be able to pay any fees and expenses upfront in advance of receiving the lump sum. If the Operational Group decides not to progress to a full stage 2 application a lower lump sum of £2,500 may be paid, provided the Operational Group presents a report which details their investigations and explains why a Stage 2 application is not being progressed.

4 HOW WILL FUNDING BE AWARDED?

CAFRE will open a call for stage 1, Establishment of an Operational Group, on Tuesday 5 May 2026 and this will close at 4pm on Friday 12 June 2026. Applications that meet the selection criteria will be issued with a Stage 1 Letter of Offer.

Only those groups who receive a stage 1 letter of offer can complete a stage 2 application which must be submitted to the Department by 4pm on Friday 30 October 2026.

Stage 2 applications, including capital funding requirements, will be assessed by a selection panel. The assessment will be based on the information provided in the application form and an interview with representatives of the Operational Group. Following this process CAFRE will award stage 2 and capital funding to up to seven Operational Groups through a Letter of Offer. Capital funding, that is approved by the panel, will be awarded through separate Letters of Offer to the individual farmers that have been identified in the Stage 2 application form.

5 WHO CAN APPLY?

At stage 1 applications must be made by a collaboration of at least two people from different organisations based in Northern Ireland, that have the relevant expertise in the area being investigated. One of the applicants must be from a farm business with a category 1 DAERA Business Identification Number.

Projects with a primary focus on horticulture are not eligible for funding, as separate schemes are available to support innovation in the horticulture sector.

At stage 2 the application must include those who made the stage 1 application, but additional members can be added. Members from outside Northern Ireland should only be considered if the expertise is not available from within Northern Ireland. Stage 2 applications must include a partnership agreement demonstrating how the Operational Group will function.

Farmers, who are members of an Operational Group and hold a category 1 DAERA business ID, will be eligible for capital funding for items that are integral to the implementation of the project. Capital requirements for each farmer must be detailed in the Stage 2 application.

6 WHO IS THE LEAD APPLICANT?

Applications must identify a lead applicant – this can either be:

- An individual acting as the 'lead applicant' for the Operational Group; or
- An organisation, such as a Ltd Company or charity, acting as the 'lead applicant' for the Operational Group.

The lead applicant must be linked to a business which has a Category 1 or Category 2 DAERA Business Identification Number. If the lead applicant does not have a Category 1 or 2 Business Number, they should apply for one and note this in their Stage 1 application. More information on DAERA Business numbers is available [here](#) and application forms can be requested by contacting the scheme administrator at innovation.partnerships@daera.gov.uk.

The lead applicant is the person or the business who represents the Operational Group and is the main point of contact with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. They are responsible for ensuring the scheme operates within the scheme rules and the terms and conditions of any grant offer. If the Department determines that the grant aid has not been used in accordance with the scheme rules or the terms and conditions of any grant award, the lead applicant of the Operational Group may be legally liable for the payment of any penalties or repayment of any grant aid given.

7 WHO CANNOT BE THE LEAD APPLICANT?

The following cannot be the lead applicant when applying for funding under the Innovation Partnership scheme:

- Government Departments;
- Entities funded wholly or partly by public money such as Non-Departmental Public bodies, unless they can separately account for expenditure under the Innovation Partnership scheme.

8 HOW IS FUNDING CLAIMED?

Grant Aid must be claimed retrospectively, no advance payments will be made. The lead applicant will therefore need to state that they, or their organisation, has the capacity to make payments on behalf of the Operational Group until grant aid is received.

For stage 1, the lump sum will only become payable provided a fully complete stage 2 application is made and all the conditions in the stage 1 Letter of Offer are met.

For stage 2 and capital funding, claim forms and guidance notes will be issued following the award of grant aid. Each claim must detail a breakdown of eligible project expenditure for which funding is being claimed. The amount of funding being claimed for each item of expenditure must be accompanied by original invoices and bank statements confirming that the invoices have been paid in full. Evidence that the procurement guidelines in section 12 have been followed must also be presented with all claims. Further guidance on how to complete the claim will be provided to successful applicants.

Claims for capital funding will be paid in to the bank account associated with the corresponding farmer's DAERA business ID. All other claims will be paid into the bank account associated with the lead applicant's DAERA Business ID.

9 WHAT IS ELIGIBLE?

At stage 2, implementation of the project action plan, the following costs are eligible:

- Area studies – for example, this may include measurements and analysis on a group of farms to quantify a particular problem.
- Feasibility studies – for example, to determine if a proposed plan of action is technically feasible.
- Business plans – for example, to support an application for capital funding from other sources.

- Market exploration – for example, to determine the market potential of an opportunity the Operational Group is considering.
- Running costs of cooperation – for example costs of a co-ordinator or Innovation Broker, costs of administration, travel expenses and meeting rooms.
- Training and mentoring required to implement the project including study tours.
- Information management tools – for example this may include computer software or services.
- Promotional activities relating to the promotion of the group and not the product, such as activities to attract membership or the dissemination of group activities.

Under the capital element of the programme, the following costs are eligible:

- The purchase of new machinery and equipment, including computer software necessary for its operation or management, up to the market value of the asset and directly related to the implementation of the approved IP project plan.

CAFRE must approve each item of expenditure and will confirm that it is eligible to be reclaimed.

10 WHAT IS NOT ELIGIBLE?

All Stage 2 expenditure must link to the list of eligible expenditure. While not definitive the following expenditure items are NOT eligible for grant aid:

- Salary costs of members of the Operational Group
- Research and Development
- Existing Innovation Projects
- Standard agricultural inputs like seed, fertiliser, chemicals, semen etc
- The costs of getting any compulsory consents – for example planning permission
- Financial charges for example bank charges or interest.
- The costs associated with Operational Group Members' own time.
- Any costs which were incurred before the Letter of Offer has been accepted and acknowledged.
- Value added tax except where it is non-recoverable under national VAT legislation.
- Any item for which the applicant already has or intends to receive public funding.
- Projects which are required by law to meet a legal obligation.
- Projects or activities that are in receipt of other public funding.

Under the capital element of the programme, the following costs are **NOT** eligible:

- The construction, acquisition, including through leasing, or improvement of immovable property.
- In the case of agricultural investments, the purchase of agricultural production rights, payment entitlements, animals, annual plants and their planting.
- Investments which are likely to have an unacceptable negative effect on the environment.
- Replacement investments and maintenance.
- Purchase and installation of renewable energy technologies.
- Interest on debt.
- The purchase of land.
- Value added tax except where it is non-recoverable under national VAT legislation.
- Any item costing less than £5,000.
- Leasing of equipment
- Second hand equipment
- Any costs which were incurred before the Letter of Offer has been accepted and acknowledged.
- The costs of getting any compulsory consents – for example planning permission

11 WHEN MUST PROJECTS BE COMPLETED?

All expenditure associated with the Operational Groups action plan must be completed by 30 November 2029 with all claims submitted by 31 December 2029. Work undertaken outwith this period will be at the Operational Group's own expense.

For capital funding all expenditure must be completed within the timeframes stated in the Letter of Offer. Invoices dated or payments made outside this timeframe will not be eligible for grant.

12 HOW MUST STAFF, GOODS AND SERVICES BE PROCURED?

Costs for, or associated with, an Innovation Broker or a Project Co-ordinator must be paid and reimbursed at a flat rate of £434 per day based on a 7.5 hour day. Costs for administrative staff duties must be paid and claimed at the agreed rate of £29.93 per hour. The cost of other support staff directly employed on the project is eligible for funding provided it can be shown such costs are in line with wider published costs for salary costs. This can include staff salaries, employers' National Insurance Contributions and statutory pension contributions.

Costs associated with travel and subsistence must be reimbursed at Northern Ireland Civil Service rates. Details of these will be provided following the issue of a Stage 2 Letter of Offer.

The purchase of all other goods and services must comply with the procurement conditions set out in the Letter of Offer. Annex D provides an overview of these requirements.

13 WHAT WILL BE EXPECTED OF GROUPS WHO RECEIVE FUNDING?

It is a condition of any grant awarded that all results and findings of the project are made available for the use of others. Operational Groups will be expected to disseminate their findings to the local Agri-Food industry, even for projects which do not achieve the expected results or outcomes. The Operational Groups plans for dissemination will be assessed as part of the Stage 2 application process.

At the end of the funding period, each Group will also be required to complete a project report, which will be published on the CAFRE website. Further details will be provided to Operational Groups that receive Stage 2 funding.

14 HOW WILL THE SCHEME BE MONITORED?

Those Operational Groups who are successful in achieving Stage 2 funding will be monitored by the CAFRE Contract Manager, on a quarterly basis, or more frequently as required. Progress will be monitored in relation to the action plan submitted in the Stage 2 application form. There is a recognition that innovation, by its nature, carries increased risk and uncertainties and therefore the action plan may need to be amended as the project progresses. The monitoring meeting will provide the opportunity to consider what changes may need to take place before formal submission to the CAFRE Contract Manager.

These meetings will also provide a forum to raise and resolve issues by both the Operational Group and CAFRE.

15 HOW DO WE APPLY?

There will be two stages to the application process. Stage 1 will be an open competition, and successful applicants will receive funding for the Establishment of an Operational Group. Only those groups who have received a Letter of Offer for Stage 1 can apply for Stage 2.

Stage 1 – Establishment of an Operational Group

Stage 1 applications must be submitted using the online application form available here. https://consultations2.nidirect.gov.uk/daera/innovation-partnership-stage-1-ap/start_preview?token=72ea6d7bcbf202dda2a26443f5b7ce14dedabfeb

The period for applications will open on Tuesday 05 May 2026 and will close at 4pm on Friday 12 June 2026. Late applications will not be considered. At Stage 1, only the information provided within the application will be assessed, and it is the applicant's responsibility to ensure that all information submitted is complete and accurate. CAFRE will not be responsible for incomplete or inaccurate information.

Stage 2 – Implementation of a Project Plan

Applicants who have been successful at Stage 1 will be issued with a Letter of Offer and will be provided with a Stage 2 application form. Stage 2 applications must be submitted by 30 October 2026.

Stage 2 applicants will be invited to attend an interview to present their project plans. A selection panel will assess the applications using information provided in the application form in conjunction with information gathered at the interview.

CAFRE will communicate with the lead applicant via email. Lead applicants should provide a current email address and notify CAFRE of any changes.

If an applicant requires any adjustments to enable them to participate in the selection interview they should inform the scheme administrator. They will make reasonable efforts to meet the request and will advise the applicant of the outcome.

Capital Funding

If the Operational Group has identified a requirement for capital funding this must be detailed in the Stage 2 application form. Applicants must submit two quotes for each capital item with the application forms. This is required to determine reasonableness of costs. The lowest quote should be used to compile the estimated project costs. The minimum cost of an individual item within an application must be £5,000.

Quotations should be:

- not more than 6 months old
- on the supplier's headed paper
- dated and include the supplier details (e.g. name, address, contact number, e-mail address, VAT No etc.)

- itemised cost and description for goods and services included in the quoted price.

Quotations from family members, relatives or someone related to the farm business or other IP Operational Group members are not allowed.

If there is only one potential supplier of equipment applicants will be required to demonstrate that there is only one supplier and this will be checked by CAFRE.

Quotes in foreign currencies should be converted to Sterling using the HMRC Monthly Exchange Rates for the date of the quote –

https://www.trade-tariff.service.gov.uk/exchange_rates/monthly

Please note that if capital funding is approved by the panel then applicants must adhere to the procurement requirements in their Letter of Offer.

Applicants must not incur any expenditure on their project prior to the date of the Letter of Offer, as expenditure incurred before this date will not be eligible for funding.

16 SELECTION CRITERIA

Stage 1

For Stage 1 applications – Establishment of an Operational Group – the following three step selection criteria will be applied as follows:

Step One

- I. The application must show that the topic or project that the Operational Group will investigate will make a positive contribution to *at least* one of the following themes; and
- II. The application must show that the topic or project the Operational Group will investigate will not have a negative impact on *any of* the following themes:

Productivity	Ambition: an industry that pursues enhanced productivity in international terms, closing the productivity gap which has been opening up with other major suppliers. This will create the basis for a profitable sector which can grow market share.
Resilience	Ambition: an industry that displays improved resilience to external shocks (such as market and currency volatility, extreme weather events, etc.) which are ever more frequent and to which the industry has become very exposed.
Environmental Sustainability	Ambition: an industry that is environmentally sustainable in terms of its impact on, and guardianship of, air and water quality, soil health, carbon footprint and biodiversity.
Supply Chain	Ambition: an industry which operates within an integrated, efficient, sustainable, competitive and responsive supply chain, with clear transmission of market signals and an overriding focus on high quality food and the end consumer.
One Health	Ambition: an industry that appreciates the interdependence of human health, animal health, the environment, and the food chain.

Step Two

For those applications that meet step one, the application will be assessed against the following two criteria:

Criteria	Pass	Fail
Clear identification of need and strategy for proposed solution including the practical application of the proposal and likely impact.	The application: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sets out a clear need for the Operational Group in the Northern Ireland context.• Sets out clearly what will be investigated by the Operational Group.	The application: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Does not identify a clear need in the Northern Ireland context.• No or limited plan in relation to what will be investigated by the Operational Group.
Complementary composition of the group to include a range of expertise such as farmers, technical advisers, scientists etc. relevant to the project objectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The group has at least one farmer with a DAERA category 1 business number.• The group has at least one other person who has expertise in the area being investigated by the Operational Group.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The group does not have at least one farmer with a DAERA category 1 business number.• The group does not have at least one other person who has expertise in the area being investigated by the Operational Group.

Step 3

If after Step 1 and Step 2 the number of applications exceeds 14, the following criteria will be applied to those applications which have passed step 1 *and* step 2:

Sets out a clear need for the Operational Group in the Northern Ireland context.

To do this a selection panel will score each application in relation to *Impact* and potential *Reach* using the scoring matrix below:

	Score	Descriptor	
Potential Impact	9-10	An issue or opportunity which has the potential to transform and produce industry-changing benefits on Northern Ireland farms	/ 10
	7-8	An issue or opportunity which has the potential to deliver a significant step forward and deliver significant and measurable benefit on Northern Ireland farms.	
	5-6	An issue or opportunity which has the potential to make a clear contribution towards delivering measurable benefit on Northern Ireland farms.	
	3-4	An issue or opportunity which has the potential to make some contribution towards delivering measurable benefit on Northern Ireland farms.	
	0-2	An issue or opportunity which has the potential to make some contribution towards delivering benefit on Northern Ireland farms but the benefits may be difficult to measure.	
Potential Reach	9-10	An issue or opportunity which has the potential to impact on most farm businesses in Northern Ireland.	/ 10
	7-8	An issue or opportunity which has the potential to impact on most farm businesses within a sector, for example dairy, pigs, production horticulture.	
	5-6	An issue or opportunity which has the potential to impact on most specialist farm businesses within a sector, for example, spring calving dairy herds, winter cereals.	
	3-4	An issue or opportunity which has the potential to impact only on farm businesses in a limited geographical area in Northern Ireland.	
	0-2	An issue or opportunity which has the potential to impact on a small number of specialist farm business	

Summary

	Score (0-10)	Weight	Total
Potential Impact		2	
Potential Reach		1	
Total Score Awarded (Maximum Score – 30)			/ 30

Funding will be awarded to the 14 applications with the highest scores.

In circumstances where two or more applications receive an equal score, the assessment panel will apply its judgement to determine the final ranking of those applications

Stage 2

For stage 2 applications the following two step selection criteria will be applied as follows:

Step One

Applicants must have received and accepted a Letter of Offer for Stage 1

Step Two

A selection panel will assess each application, using the information provided in the application form and the interview, against the six selection criteria and in line with the scoring matrix:

Criteria 1: Complementary composition of Group benefiting the specific project, making the best use of different types of knowledge (scientific, practical, entrepreneurial, organisational etc.)

Scoring Criterion	Band	Descriptor	Score
Clarity of roles	0-2	No, or very limited, clarity on roles and responsibilities of members	/ 10
	3-4	Limited clarity on roles and responsibilities of members	
	5-6	There is a leader within the group. Roles have been identified for group members	
	7-8	There is effective leadership within the group. Evidence that group members have clear roles and are committed to project delivery	
	9-10	There is excellent leadership within the group. Strong evidence that group members have clearly defined roles and are fully committed to project delivery	
Cohesion of group	0-2	No, or very limited, evidence of cohesion within the group	/ 10
	3-4	Limited evidence of cohesion within the group	
	5-6	Reasonable evidence of cohesion within the group	
	7-8	Good / sound evidence of cohesion within the group	
	9-10	Excellent / strong evidence of cohesion within the group	

Criteria 2: Practical application of the project and expected impact: benefits to primary producer or sector

Scoring Criterion	Band	Descriptor	Score
Practical application	0-2	No, or limited, evidence of how the project will be practically implemented	/ 8
	3-4	Reasonable evidence of how the project will be practically implemented	
	5-6	Good evidence of how the project will be practically implemented	
	7-8	Excellent evidence of how the project will be practically implemented	
Impact: This section should consider the scope the impact will have upon the group, area and sector	0-1	No, or very limited, potential to create an impact within the relevant sector	/ 6
	2-3	Limited potential to create an impact within the relevant sector	
	4-5	Good potential to create an impact within the relevant sector	
	6	Excellent potential to create an impact within the relevant sector	
Multiplier effect: This section should consider the scale of the impact and the number of people who will be impacted	0-1	The proposal may have no or limited impact on people and / or sectors	/ 6
	2-3	The proposal may have a reasonable impact on people and / or sectors	
	4-5	The proposal may have a good impact on people and / or sectors	
	6	The proposal may have an excellent impact on many people and / or sectors	

Criteria 3: Affordability, value for money and added value of the project

Scoring Criterion	Band	Descriptor	Score
Affordability	0-1	No, or very limited, evidence of potential to achieve project aims with the funding available	/ 4
	2	Limited evidence of potential to achieve project aims with the funding available	
	3	Good evidence of potential to achieve project aims with the funding available	
	4	Excellent evidence of potential to achieve project aims with the funding available	
Monetary benefits (Value for money)	0-2	No, or very limited, potential to provide value for money and create monetary benefits	/ 8
	3-4	Limited potential to provide value for money and create monetary benefits	
	5-6	Good potential to provide value for money and create monetary benefits	
	7-8	Excellent potential to provide value for money and create monetary benefits	
Non-monetary benefits (Added value)	0-2	No, or very limited, potential to create or enhance non-monetary benefits	/ 8
	3-4	Limited potential to create or enhance non-monetary benefits	
	5-6	Good potential to create or enhance non-monetary benefits	
	7-8	Excellent potential to create or enhance non-monetary benefits	

Criteria 4: Environmental impact

Scoring Criterion	Band	Descriptor	Score
This section should consider the wider impact on the environment; water, air, soil and ecosystems.	0-5	Potential to have a negative impact	/ 20
	6-10	Neutral impact / limited potential to have a positive impact	
	11-15	Good potential to have a positive impact	
	15-20	Targeted positive impact / excellent potential to have a positive impact	

Criteria 5: Contribution to climate change mitigation and adaptation

Scoring Criterion	Band	Descriptor	Score
Clarity and understanding of what the project wishes to achieve with respect to climate change and adaptation	0-2	No, or very limited, clarity or understanding	/ 10
	3-4	Limited clarity and understanding	
	5-6	Good clarity and understanding	
	7-8	Strong clarity and understanding	
	9-10	Excellent clarity and understanding	
Impact of the project on climate change and adaptation	0-2	No, or very limited, potential to have a positive impact	/ 10
	3-4	Limited potential to have a positive impact	
	5-6	Good potential to have a positive impact	
	7-8	Strong potential to have a positive impact	
	9-10	Excellent potential to have a positive impact	

Criteria 6: Proposals for dissemination of information

Scoring Criterion	Band	Descriptor	Score
Intensity: Consider the frequency of dissemination and size of the target audience	0-2	No, or weak, dissemination proposals / will reach a very narrow audience	/ 8
	3-4	Limited dissemination proposals / will reach a small audience	
	5-6	Good dissemination proposals / will reach a medium audience	
	7-8	Excellent dissemination proposals / will reach a large audience	
Industry orientation / focus: Dissemination should reach a variety of people including rural community and industry	0-2	Limited dissemination focus within a sub-sector / rural community	/ 8
	3-4	Dissemination focus across a reasonable range of sectors / rural community	
	5-6	Dissemination focus across a good range of sectors / rural community	
	7-8	Dissemination focus across all sectors / rural community	
Types of dissemination: Consider the variety of dissemination methods chosen, for example presentations, discussions with rural community, popular press, publications, online content and technical papers. Information must be readily accessible to the target audience	0-1	Few / inappropriate dissemination methods identified	/ 4
	2	Reasonable variety of appropriate dissemination methods identified	
	3	Good variety of appropriate dissemination methods identified	
	4	Excellent variety of appropriate dissemination methods identified	

Summary

Selection Criterion	Score (1-20)	Weight (1-5)	Total
Complementary composition of Group benefiting the specific project, making the best use of different types of knowledge (scientific, practical, entrepreneurial, organisational etc.)		5	
Practical application of the project and expected impact: benefits to primary producer or sector		5	
Affordability, value for money and added value of the project		5	
Environmental impact		3	
Contribution to climate change mitigation and adaptation		3	
Proposals for dissemination of information		5	

Total Score Awarded (Maximum Score – 520)	
Total Score Awarded as a % of 100 (Pass score 60%)	

Capital Funding

Capital funding requirements will be assessed by the panel against the following selection criteria and awarded either a pass or fail. Applications must achieve a pass for each of the following criteria.

(1) The investment links directly to the objectives and outcomes of the approved IP project

Applicants must clearly outline how all parts of the capital investment will link to the project objectives and the contribution it will make to the achievement of the outcomes agreed as part of the approved IP project.

(2) The investment demonstrates value for money in monetary and non-monetary terms

DAERA will complete a value for money assessment of the estimated costs as proposed by the applicants.

Applicants must also provide details of the non-monetary benefits that will be achieved through this investment.

(3) Health and Safety issues have been addressed.

Applicants must outline the Health and Safety impacts on the farm business as a result of the investment. If the investment has any negative Health and Safety impacts the application will be failed.

(4) The investment will not have a negative environmental impact.

Applicants must outline any environment benefits that can be achieved as a result of the investment. If the investment has any negative environmental impacts the application will be failed.

17 PROCESSING OF APPLICATIONS

Applications will be acknowledged within five working days following receipt by CAFRE.

At Stage 1, the Contract Manager will assess the applications against the assessment criteria (see section 16) for steps 1 and 2. If more than 14 applications meet the criteria at steps 1 and 2, a selection panel will be convened and step 3 will be implemented.

Stage 1 funding will be offered to all applicants who meet the criteria at step one and two, unless there are more than 14. If there are more than 14 applications who meet these criteria, the 14 applications with the highest scores awarded by the selection panel will be granted funding.

At Stage 2, CAFRE will convene a selection panel who will consider the information in the Stage 2 application forms along with information collected at interview to score the applications against the assessment criteria (see section 16). The interview will be with the lead partner and one other member of the Operational Group and will last up to 45 minutes. It will be conducted at CAFRE, Greenmount Campus, ANTRIM BT41 4PS unless otherwise notified. The seven applications receiving the highest scores will be awarded funding.

The Stage 2 panel will also consider the eligibility of capital items.

The following is an indicative timetable for the application process. This is subject to change.

Stage 1 applications open	Tuesday 05 May 2026
Stage 1 application close	4pm Friday 12 June 2026
Award of Stage 1 funding	Week commencing 6 July 2026
Closing date for Stage 2 applications	4pm Friday 30 October 2026
Interviews for Stage 2 applications	Week commencing 16 November 2026
Award of Stage 2 and capital funding	Week commencing 23 November 2026

18 FEASIBILITY STUDY

The Stage 2 Assessment Panel may conclude that an application presents a strong concept but requires further investigation and detailed project planning before it is ready for implementation. In such cases, the panel may recommend that a feasibility study be undertaken to further develop the project scope and assess its viability. To qualify for a feasibility study the application must meet the minimum pass rate of 60%.

Funding of up to £10,000 may be awarded to support the completion of this feasibility study. The feasibility study must be carried out by an organisation that is not part of the Operational Group, and the services must be procured in accordance with the procurement requirements set out in the Letter of Offer.

Upon completion, the applicant must submit the feasibility study, together with any revisions to the project plan, to the assessment panel. The panel will then re-assess the application to determine whether the project should be approved for full Stage 2 funding. The panel will also determine whether an interview with the applicant is required.

The awarding of funding for a feasibility study will be at the discretion of the assessment panel.

19 SUCCESSFUL APPLICATIONS

If your application is successful, a Stage 2 Letter of Offer will be issued by the CAFRE Contract Manager. The lead partner identified in the application form is required to sign the acceptance form and return it by the date stated in the Letter of Offer.

If an acceptance form has not been received by the date stated on the Letter of Offer then CAFRE may withdraw the offer of funding and allocate the funding to the next highest scoring project.

If group members are awarded capital funding then they will be issued with individual Letters of Offer. If the capital funding is not accepted by the group members, then CAFRE may review the viability of the project and withdraw the offer of funding for the entire project.

20 UNSUCCESSFUL APPLICATIONS

Where an application is unsuccessful the lead applicant will be notified. The letter will indicate if:

- I. The application failed to meet the selection criteria, or
- II. The application did not receive sufficiently high score in competition with other applicants.

An opportunity to receive feedback will be offered.

Unsuccessful applicants may submit a new application in any future tranches.

21 REVIEW OF DECISIONS PROCESS

The lead applicant can request a review of the decision. The request must be made in writing (or by email) and must be received within 10 working days of the issue of the letter of refusal. The request should clearly state the reason for the review.

Decisions will be reviewed by a CAFRE Head of Branch, who was not involved in the original decision, to ensure they comply with the scheme operating rules. The lead applicant will be notified within 10 working days of the review outcome. The outcome of this review will be final.

22 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY POLICY

CAFRE is committed to providing equality of opportunity and promoting diversity. CAFRE will promote equality of opportunity between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation; between men and women generally; and between persons with a disability and persons without; and between persons with dependants and persons without.

Members of the proposed Operational Group, identified in the application form will be invited to complete an anonymous equality monitoring questionnaire.

23 SHARING OF INFORMATION, DATA PROTECTION AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

CAFRE as part of DAERA takes data protection, freedom of information and environmental information issues seriously. It takes care to ensure that any personal information received is dealt with in a way which complies with the requirements of the General Data Protection Regulations (2016). This means that

any personal information collected will be processed principally for the purpose for which it has been provided.

However, DAERA is under a duty to protect the public funds it administers, and to this end may use the information provided for this purpose. It may also share this information with other bodies responsible for the audit or administration of public funds, in order to prevent and detect crime.

DAERA may publish details of funding awarded to beneficiaries in line with any legislative requirements.

In addition, DAERA may also use it for other legitimate purposes in line with the General Data Protection Regulations, Freedom of Information Act 2000 and Environmental Information Regulations 2004.

To see the full DAERA Privacy Statement please go to <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/daera-privacy-statement-document>.

24 FRAUD

Any person who knowingly or recklessly makes a false statement for the purposes of obtaining assistance under this Scheme or assisting another to obtain grant aid may be prosecuted. Information provided or gathered in relation to the Scheme may be made available to other Departments/Agencies for the purposes of preventing or detecting crime.

DAERA FRAUD HOTLINE – Telephone 0808 1002716

25 WHERE DO WE FIND MORE INFORMATION?

Applicants can visit the CAFRE website to find out more about other Operational Groups and their projects.

The CAFRE Contract Manager can also be contacted about the application process. The contact details of the Contract Manager are:

Name:	Norman Weatherup
e-mail:	Norman.Weatherup@daera-ni.gov.uk
Telephone:	028 9442 6762

Annex D - Procurement

Introduction

All expenditure approved in the Letter of Offer must be procured in a cost-effective manner that demonstrates value for money. All claims for the re-imbursment of the eligible expenditure in your approved project budget will be checked to ensure that the procurement requirements have been followed.

What is required?

Up to £10,000	Seek 2 price checks. All price checks must be documented, dated and retained for reference
£10,000 to £50,000	Seek 2 detailed written quotations after providing a specification.
Over £50,000	Public Advertisement in a regional newspaper for example (Belfast Telegraph / Newsletter / Irish News) for open or restricted tender competition.

When tendering for items or services over £50,000 it is important that: –

- i. The Operational Group provides a detailed specification for the goods / services you require.
- ii. The same specification for items and/or services is presented when seeking tenders from all companies so that suppliers provide comparable tenders for the same goods and services.
- iii. The advert placed has contact details for supply of tender documents and a closing date by which tenders must be returned.
- iv. Tenders are opened at the same time and no advance knowledge of bids is made available to anyone prior to this opening or during the tendering process. A suitably qualified and experienced individual must supervise the tendering process.
- v. Receipts, invoices and copies of all bids are retained for inspection.
- vi. Applicants must keep a record of the tendering process, including original documentation, notes of decisions and the assessment of the tenders.
- vii. Applicants must not accept a tender from a family member, relative or someone linked to the farm business without the approval of CAFRE.

Purchase of Specialist Equipment / Sole Supplier

In circumstances where there is only one supplier of a particular good or service and it is not possible to obtain different quotations or not practical or cost effective to place a public advertisement for open tender then you must, before placing an order, seek the approval of CAFRE to proceed with the purchase.

Accepting a Quotation or Tender

The quotation or tender that you accept must be the lowest which represents best value for money. If the lowest quoted cost is not accepted the reason(s) for the decision must be recorded. If an applicant decides to choose a quotation based on personal preference, then any additional cost will be met by the applicant.