



# DfT Rural Transport Innovation Accelerator

Application Guidance

# 1. Introduction

## Background

The Department of Transport (DfT) is supporting SMEs and local authorities to expedite the integration of innovative practices, enhance transportation services for users, and foster improved connectivity within rural communities. This accelerator programme will expedite the uptake of innovations to improve transport in rural areas through a series of demonstrators that will develop potential solutions to the challenges that have been set out in [DfT's rural transport innovation guide](#).

This programme addresses the DfT's objective to support and increase the use of innovation to address challenges within the transport system. In addition, it directly supports the following strategic priorities:

- Improving transport for the user, delivering, and maintaining a transport system that is safe, reliable, joined-up and inclusive.
- Reducing environmental impacts, tackling climate change, and improving air quality by providing alternative transport choices for users.
- Improving access to public transport, reducing car dependency, and promoting active travel.
- Growing and levelling up the economy by accelerating projects that support the regeneration of left-behind towns and places.

## About the Programme

The DfT Rural Transport Innovation Accelerator programme will support 6 – 8 projects, which will adopt innovative approaches to enhancing rural mobility, up to £150k of funding per project. The focus of the programme is on enhancing rural transport, offering people more choice and enabling better connections with local areas.

The programme is seeking applications from innovators (SMEs) and local authorities working in partnership to develop technology, products and services that aim to make the UK's transport network safer, more resilient, greener, and more accessible. This initiative serves a dual purpose, contributing to both the adoption of innovative solutions and the overall wellbeing of rural communities.

Alongside the trials, innovators (SMEs) can access a bespoke support programme tailored to their needs and requirements, including procurement readiness, product development support and business coaching. These activities will be scoped with each innovator (SME) to support them improve the feasibility, scalability, and impact of their trials, and to bolster the product-market fit of their technologies.

## About this Document

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

Successful applicants will be contracted directly by Connected Places Catapult, funded by the Department for Transport, through a Pilot Participation Agreement which is subject to the terms and conditions set out on the website.

## 2. Eligibility

### Eligibility Criteria

We are seeking applications for demonstrators/trials in which the lead applicant will be contracted directly by Connected Places Catapult, funded by the Department for Transport.

The lead applicant **must** have established a partnership or consortium which includes an innovative micro or small to medium sized enterprise (< 250 employees), with a solution that is at TRL 5-7, **and** at least one of the following:

- a Local Authority rural district,
- Sub-national Transport Body (STB) within a rural district,
- a Tier 1 supplier of a Local Authority with the ability to run the demonstrator in a rural area.

The consortium or partnership of applicants **must** be:

- able to address one or more challenge statements with the proposed solution,
- willing to complete a development, testing or demonstration of your solution in a real or relevant environment,
- willing to travel on occasion to face-to-face meetings and events,
- based in the UK.

On the basis of this [classification guide](#), eligible Local Authority districts should be classified as Mainly Rural (80% or more of the population resides in rural areas), Largely Rural (between 50% and 79% of the population resides in rural areas), or Urban with Significant Rural (between 26% and 49% of the population resides in rural areas).

## Equity, Diversity & Inclusion

This 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}, as well as other historic barriers to opportunity, such as “class”, nationality, dialect, education and other forms of socio-economic exclusion.

The Programme is committed to carrying the following initiatives to uphold EDI principles:

- Provide a level playing field for all innovators seeking to apply to participate in the programme by anonymising application forms and implementing a fair, standardised scoring process.
- 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 (where possible).

## 3. Application Guidance

### General Guidance

- Carefully read this guidance document whilst preparing your application.
- You can access the application form on our Programme Page.
- Your responses in Section 2 & 3 of the application **should not** disclose your name, your company name, or name of any person(s) working at your company. Complete anonymity reduces the potential for bias and discrimination during the application assessment process and ensures that evaluations are based only on the credibility and suitability of your responses for this programme.
- Only the information included within your application form is subject to assessment, including any additional attachments, where requested.
- Your application will automatically save so you can return to edit later.

- Applications must be submitted by midnight 29<sup>th</sup> February 2024. Late submissions will not be accepted or considered.
- Applications will be assessed from 1<sup>st</sup> March – 6<sup>th</sup> March. Shortlisted applicants will be contacted before midday on 7<sup>th</sup> March and provided with a 30-minute interview invitation on 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> March.
- 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 excluded from your submission.
- In addition to the information included in the application form, further guidance on what should be included 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 before submitting.

## Application Questions

For the programme's assessment panel to accurately evaluate your application, we require the following information in your application.

**Technology Readiness Levels** – 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.

**Understanding of the Challenge** – You should clearly describe the problem or challenge you are seeking to address. Please do not give details of your innovation here. You should focus on the problem you are trying to solve in respect to the challenges. Why is the current approach for addressing this problem not fit for purpose? Any included measurable data to evidence this will strengthen your application.

**Solution** – Tell us all about your solution in this section, without obscure jargon or acronyms, in plain language. What is it, what does it do and how does it work?

**Innovation** – Please provide a compelling case for why and how your solution is innovative. For example, does your solution apply existing technologies in new areas, is it about developing new technologies for existing areas or is it a completely novel approach? You should explain your competitive advantage, articulating why your solution is better than others on the market. Make sure you explain how your solution will advance and improve the current state of play within the industry. You should also tell us whether you have protected your IP through patents, copyright, or trademarks.

**Market Understanding & 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. **Please do not include any names of individual team members so that we can maintain anonymity during the scoring process.**

**Programme Objectives** – We would like to understand your motivation for applying to the programme and what you (and your consortium partners) would hope to gain from being involved if you were selected.

**Consortium Partners** – Please specify which organisation(s) you have established a partnership or consortium with to develop this project idea, as well as the extent of their engagement and how they will be involved in the delivery of this project.

**Trial Summary** - Please provide a summary of your proposed trial, including what you're trialling (the specific technology and why), the specific problem you are trying to solve (include any supporting data that you have), your motivation and objectives for the trial, who you will test with, any key requirements and the expected outputs.

**Trial Design** – Please give a high-level project design detailing how you would develop and demonstrate your technology or solution on this programme. You should include:

- 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.
- What you hope to learn/demonstrate on the trial
- Please feel free to upload any supporting documentation.

**Expected Impact and Evaluation** – Please describe the impact(s) you believe your solution will have by addressing the challenge(s) identified, and please specify the evaluation metrics to be used. You should consider impact from the perspective of

the wider industry and your own business. Please provide your approach for evaluating the impact of your solution.

**Project Finances** – You can invoice up to £150,000 of your fees for your trial delivery work on this programme. All direct project costs can be included in your financial breakdown, including staff resource, equipment, consumables, travel, and subsistence. Please note that sub-contractor and material costs should be justified within your project plan; all projects should demonstrate value for money. All cost information provided should be clearly explained and all rates must reflect fair market value.

**Match Funding** – If your project will be receiving any match funding from your consortium partners, including in-kind match funding such as working days, access to data or assets, please explain how this contribution will support your proposed project.

## 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 the Connected Places Catapult. Assessors with a broad technical knowledge across different areas of transport and technology will mark your application. You should therefore write clearly in plain language, avoiding acronyms and obscure jargon.

### Scoring Criteria

This section details the criteria our assessors will use when scoring your application. Under each criterion there is a maximum score of 5 available.

#### Solution (25%)

To achieve the highest score under this criterion, your application should demonstrate the following to our assessment panel:

- **Technology** – The technology is unique, and it offers significant added value compared to the status quo.
- **Business Model** – The business model is highly feasible and highly scalable for this market and/or application.
- **Market** – The addressable market is exceptionally large and/or rapidly growing with no significant barriers to entry.

- **Competition** – There is huge advantage and clear differentiation between this solution and other competitive solutions available on the market.

## Team (25%)

To achieve the highest score under this criterion, your application should demonstrate the following to our assessment panel:

- **Skills** – The team is highly credible and demonstrates without doubt the necessary technical and commercial skills execute this project.
- **Experience** – The team benefits from having multiple key members with extensive industry knowledge and previous project and/or entrepreneurial success.

## Traction (25%)

To achieve the highest score under this criterion, your application should demonstrate the following to our assessment panel:

- **Customer Engagement** – There is significant evidence of qualified leads and/or engagement from customers within relevant sectors or markets.
- **Product-Market Fit** – There is significant evidence of commercial validation and product-market fit, resulting in successful projects (including proof-of-concepts) with measurable benefits for their customers.
- **Financial Risk** – The remaining financial runway is extremely healthy (12-18 months) and supported by robust revenue models posing very low risk of dissolution or bankruptcy during the programme's lifespan.

## Programme Fit (25%)

To achieve the highest score under this criterion, your application should demonstrate the following to our assessment panel:

- **Challenges** – The solution and proposal have a strong fit to one or more challenge statements.
- **Feasibility** – The proposal would be highly feasible to deliver within the scope of this programme (time, resources, budget).
- **Impact** - The proposal would produce extensive commercial and social benefits and demonstrates significant improvement to the existing approach.
- **Technology Readiness** – The technology readiness level of the proposed solution is within the scope of this programme (TRL 5-7).
- **Location** – The applicant and its consortium partners are all based in the UK.

## Notification of Assessment Outcome



Following the initial assessment, up to sixteen applicants will be shortlisted for interview. Interviews will take place on 12 – 13 March 2024. You will be provided with a virtual joining link and interview guidance no later than close of business on 7 March 2024 if you are successfully shortlisted. Regrettably we will be unable to accommodate specific requests for interview slots, therefore it is imperative that you try to keep your diary as open and flexible as possible on these dates.

Only applicants that progress to the assessment stage will be given a breakdown of the scores achieved for each section of the application form. 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 for unsuccessful applicants.

If your application is successful, you will be issued a 'Pilot Participation Agreement' that you must sign and return, along with any additional documentation that is requested within stated timelines.

## 5. Project Reporting

### Trial Plan

After inducting onto the programme, you will be required to produce a trial plan that outlines the project you will be delivering to demonstrate your technology or solution in respect to the challenge/s you are addressing. This should be developed and submitted to Connected Places Catapult to review during the Trial Refinement Phase (22 April 2024 – 14 June 2024). While the trial plan should be written and presented to a professional standard, it should be suitable for a non-specialist audience, with any unavoidable acronyms and technical language explained.

### Trial Delivery

During the programme you will be required to report on the progress of your trial against previously outlined deliverables and milestones, as well as highlighting opportunities, issues, and risks. You will be asked to attend a Midterm Progress Review during the Trial Delivery Phase (1 July 2024 – 10 January 2025) with Connected Places Catapult and the Department for Transport.

### Trial Evaluation

After delivering your project, you will be required to produce an Evaluation Report detailing the project's outcomes, impact, and future exploitation plans during the

Trial Evaluation & Impact Assessment Phase (13 January 2025 – 28 February 2025). You will also be issued a survey to complete which will capture your experience of participating in the programme, as well as invited to attend an Exit Interview with Connected Places Catapult.

## Financial Reporting

Please keep evidence of all your project costs. You will be asked to provide a clear breakdown of costs when claiming for funds throughout the programme.

## 6. Funding Rules and Payment Schedule

- We will be procuring projects under a pre-commercial Pilot & Trial contract.
- Participants who are successful will be required to sign a separate Pilot & Trial contract.
- **Please note all funding will be awarded to the lead applicant, who will then be responsible for distributing funding as required among consortium partners. Under question 2, we ask you to specify how much funding each partner will receive.**
- Once the contract has been signed, the Catapult will provide you with a Purchase Order number which must be clearly noted on all invoices.
- This will be a commercial arrangement. If you are VAT registered, please include the appropriate VAT on the face of the invoice.
- Payments will be staged. An up-front payment of **40%** (of the total project value) will be made at the start of the Trial Delivery Phase. A mid-term payment of **30%** will be paid during the Trial Delivery Phase after your Midterm Progress Review. The final payment of **30%** will be paid during the Trial Evaluation Phase upon receipt and approval of your evaluation report.
- For all payments, you will need to raise an invoice and send this to us. Funding will be released 30 days after receipt of your invoice.

## 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 we can. The closing date for applications is fixed and will be midnight on **Thursday 29 February 2024**. We will begin assessing applications from Friday 1 March 2024.

**Applications submitted after the deadline will not be considered. Extensions will not be granted under any circumstances.**

Competition Opens	19 January 2024
Consortium Building Event (Virtual)	6 February 2024
Application Support Clinic (Virtual)	12 February 2024
Competition Closes	29 February 2024
Notification to Shortlisted Applicants	7 March 2024
Interviews	12 – 13 March 2024
Feedback provided to Unsuccessful Applicants	15 March 2024
Contracts Issued	18 March 2024
Contracts Signed & Returned	28 March 2024
Welcome Day	23 April 2024

## 8. Contact Details

If you have any questions about the programme, please contact Jasmine Pollock, Interim Accelerator Programme Manager [here](#).

We wish you luck with your application!