

Analysis for Innovators (A4I)

Enabling innovation and improving productivity
and competitiveness for UK SMEs

Call 2026 Guide for Applicants Stage 1 - Expressions of Interest

1. Introduction

This document provides a guide to all businesses interested in applying to the Analysis for Innovators (A4I) programme, including an overview of the programme, the eligibility and scope criteria, timelines for the Call, and how to apply to Stage 1.

2. Programme Summary

Funded by the UK Government with a total available research fund of £1.8M for the 2026 Call, A4I helps UK SMEs address their analysis and measurement problems related to products or services that have already been commercialised. Successful applicants will undertake a collaborative research project involving expert measurement scientists and cutting-edge facilities provided by the UK National Measurement Institutes.

Projects will be between 3 and 9 months in duration, and between £15,000 and £100,000 in value. SMEs will be required to provide 30 % of the project costs via an in-kind contribution and the remainder will be funded by A4I programme support for the programme partners.

A4I helps companies to:

- Improve reliability of products, services and processes
- Improve performance of existing products
- Improve manufacturing output
- Reduce rejection rates and costs
- Demonstrate the meeting of standards and specifications
- Access new markets

3. Programme Partners

Together, the programme partners run some of the most advanced facilities, techniques and technologies available in the world. A4I matches the best UK measurement scientists and facilities with companies that have analysis or measurement problems. The A4I partners are:

The National Physical Laboratory (NPL)

The National Measurement Laboratory (NML) at LGC

The National Gear Metrology Laboratory (NGML) at Newcastle University (NCL)

TÜV SÜD National Engineering Laboratory (NEL)

The National Institute for Biological Standards and Control (NIBSC) at the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA)

4. Application Process

A4I is a two-stage application process.

Stage 1 is an initial expression of interest and asks companies to explain their measurement challenge in simple terms. Applications are reviewed by scientific experts from the programme partners, to assess whether the partner could have the right expertise to help with the challenge, and to ensure that the problem cannot be solved by routine measurements that are commercially available.

All eligible applications deemed in scope at Stage 1 move forward to **Brokerage** meetings which are confidential discussions between the applicant and at least one of the partners, providing an opportunity to explain the challenge in more detail and focus on potential approaches to solving your problem. Each applicant may meet more than one partner during Brokerage, if more than one partner has been identified as having relevant expertise to support the application.

After Brokerage, both the company and the partners are asked whether, having spoken in depth, they believe there is a viable project opportunity and they would like to proceed. A match-making process then determines which companies' applications will be taken forward to Stage 2, and with which partner.

Stage 2 asks for full project proposals to be submitted, including budgets and plans for the work activities and a route for exploitation of the outputs. These are developed collaboratively between the company and project partner. Stage 2 proposals are assessed by independent external reviewers and scored according to strict criteria to produce a ranked list of proposals, from which the funding line can be drawn.

Please note that this is a competitive process and the programme has a funding limit, so it is possible that some of the proposed projects that apply at Stage 2 will not be successful, even if the proposal scores highly. The highest-ranked proposals above the funding line will be accepted and should start by 1 April 2027, once project contracts are in place.

5. Key Dates

The following table outlines the planned key dates for this Call round. Please note that these dates may be subject to change. Any revisions will be made clear on the A4I web homepage.

Stage 1	Opens 15 September 2026 Closes 6 October 2026 at 11.00am
Applicant Briefing webinar (an opportunity to hear from the programme partners and ask questions about Stage 1) Registration link here	22 September 2026
Applicants notified of outcome	19 October 2026
Brokerage session invitations	21 October 2026
Brokerage meetings	4 – 18 November 2026
Brokerage outcome notifications	4 December 2026
Stage 2	Opens 8 December 2026 Closes 12 January 2027 at 11.00am
Applicants notified of outcome	19 February 2027
Projects start	By 1 April 2027
Projects end	By 31 December 2027

6. Funding Mechanism

This competition provides funding under the Minimal Financial Assistance (MFA). MFA allows public bodies to award up to £315,000 to an enterprise in a three-year rolling financial period. If you are successful at Stage 1 and progress to your Stage 2 application, you will be asked to declare previous MFA funding received by you, from any other source, in the previous three years. This will form part of the financial checks ahead of A4I making a formal grant offer.

To establish your eligibility, we will need to check that our support, added to the amount you have previously received, does not exceed the limit of £315,000 in the 'applicable period' for your organisation.

Successful Stage 1 applicants will be invited to submit a Stage 2 project proposal, with total project costs between £15,000 and £100,000.

Up to 70 % of the costs of the project will be provided through free access to the measurement expertise and world-leading facilities of the programme partners (funded by A4I), with the remaining proportion contributed in-kind by the industrial applicant.

In-kind contributions might include items such as: staff time, use of equipment or facilities, provision of consumable materials or test specimens, travel and subsistence, other project operating costs and overheads. Further details on the eligibility of project costs will be provided at Stage 2 of the Call.

7. Eligibility and Scope Criteria

This is Stage 1 of a 2-stage competition. No funding is awarded at this stage; it aims to determine,

- a) whether your organisation is **eligible** to apply for this funding opportunity,
- b) whether your problem falls within the **scope** of the competition, and
- c) whether any of the programme partners might be able to help solve your challenge.

7.1 Organisation Eligibility

- A4I is open to UK-registered SMEs only. For company size category definitions please click [here](#).
- A business may make only one application to this competition round.
- This competition will not fund your organisation, or provide any financial benefit to any individual or entities directly or indirectly involved with your organisation, which would expose the programme or any direct or indirect beneficiary of funding from the programme to [UK Sanctions](#). For example, through any procurement, commercial, business development or supply chain activity with any entity as lead, partner or subcontractor related to [these countries](#), administrations and terrorist groups.
- The programme expects and supports the provision and safeguarding of welfare standards for animals used in research and innovation, according to best practice and up to date guidance. Applicants must ensure that all of the proposed work within projects will comply with UK and international regulations. Any projects selected for funding which involve animals will be asked to provide additional information on welfare and ethical considerations,

as well as compliance with any relevant legislation as part of the project start-up process. This information will be reviewed before an award is made.

- The programme is unable to award organisations that are considered to be in financial difficulty. Financial viability and eligibility tests will be conducted to confirm this is not the case following the application at Stage 2. EU State aid rules now only apply in limited circumstances. Please see [the Windsor Framework](#) to check if these rules apply to your organisation.
- Your funding from this competition will be subject to Minimal Financial Assistance limits. You will be made ineligible if you exceed this limit. You must submit a completed declaration as part of your application in Stage 2.
- If you are unsure about your obligations under the Subsidy Control Act 2022 or the State aid rules, you should take independent legal advice. The programme team is unable to advise on individual eligibility or legal obligations. You must always make sure that the funding awarded to you is compliant with all current Subsidy Control legislation applicable in the United Kingdom. This aims to regulate any advantage granted by a public sector body which threatens to or distorts competition in the United Kingdom or any other country or countries

7.2 Project Scope

To be considered 'in scope' your proposal must:

- describe a measurement or analysis challenge where you are seeking to improve your business' productivity or competitiveness
- relate to an existing process, product or service owned or used by your company
- not be solvable by 'off the shelf' methods or techniques
- relate to a product or service which has already been commercialised
- relate to a problem being resolved in the UK
- intend to exploit the results from or in the UK
- involve at least one of the programme partner organisations (this is agreed before applying to Stage 2)

The programme will not consider problems that are:

- not measurement or analysis problems
- ones considered to be resolvable with easily available methods, such as those that do not require any innovative or cutting-edge science or facilities
- solely computer software analysis problems, such as algorithms to analyse objects
- not related to a company's existing processes, products or services owned or used by the company
- involved with primary production in fishery and aquaculture
- involved with primary production in agriculture
- relating to the purchase of road freight transport
- not allowed under De minimis regulation restrictions.

- not eligible to receive Minimal Financial Assistance

Notes:

- You can use a previously submitted application to apply for this competition. If you have previously submitted an application that reached the assessment at Stage 2 (it was considered eligible), you can re-apply once more with the same proposal.
- You can use a previously submitted application with changes/differences to the proposal, but if it is judged by us to be 'not materially different' from the original, the same above rule will apply.
- If successful at Stage 1, proposals submitted to Stage 2 must be of duration between 3 and 9 months, must be delivered within the window 1 April 2027 and 31 December 2027, and may not have total budgeted costs greater than £100,000.

8. How to apply – Stage 1

Applications should be submitted using the online application form, [here](#).

You will be asked for details about your organisation, to describe what your measurement challenge is, and to give information about the product or service it relates to. You must indicate what you consider to be the benefits of solving your problem, such as improved productivity or competitiveness, and outline any methods or attempts that you have previously tried to address the problem.

At Stage 1, you are **not** required to propose any solutions to the problem, nor to propose any project plans or budgets. If successful, these details will be worked on with an A4I programme partner and submitted at Stage 2.

You must answer all questions on the application form. Do not include any website addresses (URLs) in your answers, unless specifically requested to do so in the question.

Before submitting your Stage 1 application on our portal, please make sure that:

- all the information provided in the application is correct
- your application meets the eligibility and scope criteria outlined above
- all sections of the application are marked as complete
- you have saved a copy of the application for your records. Once you have submitted, you will not be able to make any changes

Review and partner brokerage sessions

After the close of Stage 1, your application will be reviewed as follows:

- The programme Competitions Office will check your organisation's eligibility and perform an initial assessment of scope.
- All eligible applications will be passed to expert scientists at all programme partner organisations, to decide whether each application is a measurement or analysis problem that requires cutting-edge scientific expertise and facilities, or whether the

problem is solvable using easily available 'off the shelf' methods and techniques and is therefore out of scope.

- The scientists at the programme partner organisations will decide whether they have a potential approach to solving your problem that they would like to discuss with you during brokerage.

The A4I Competitions Office will notify all applicants of the outcome of Stage 1 applications, according to the key dates above. If your application is successful at this first stage, you will be invited to attend brokerage sessions with one or more programme partner organisations.

Accessibility and Inclusion

Applications are welcome and encouraged from people of all backgrounds. We are committed to making our application process accessible to everyone and can provide support, in the form of reasonable adjustments, for people who have a disability or a long-term condition and face barriers in their application.

We recommend contacting us as soon as possible and no later than 15 working days before the competition closing date, to allow us to put the most suitable support in place.

9. Data Sharing

This competition is jointly operated by the programme Competitions Office, and the programme partner organisations (each an 'agency').

Any relevant information submitted and produced during the application process concerning your application can be shared by one agency with the other, for its individual storage, processing and use.

This means that any information given to or generated by the programme in respect of your application may be passed on to the programme partner organisations and vice versa. This would include, but is not restricted to:

- the information stated on the application, including the personal details of all applicants
- scoring and feedback on the application
- information received during the management and administration of the grant
- the programme and the programme partner organisations are directly accountable to you for their holding and processing of your information, including any personal data and confidential information. Data is held in accordance with their own policies. Accordingly, the programme, and the programme partner organisations will be data controllers for personal data submitted during the application and therefore an additional Non-disclosure Agreement (NDA) is not required for brokerage

The programme complies with the requirements of UK GDPR and the [Data Protection Act 2018](#), and is committed to upholding data protection legislation, and protecting your information in accordance with data protection principles.

For further details, the Information Commissioner's Office also has a [useful guide](#) for organisations, which outlines the data protection principles.

10. Contact Details

If you experience any technical difficulties whilst using the application form, or have any questions regarding the programme or this Stage 1 Call, please contact us using the email CompetitionsOffice@npl.co.uk.