



[REDACTED]

25 June 2026

Dear [REDACTED]

Freedom of Information request: FOI2026/00446

Thank you for your Freedom of Information request received on the 20 May in which you requested the following:

Your request:

Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, I would like to request information relating to Innovate UK and/or DSIT innovation assessment structures concerning early-stage applicants and exploratory scientific projects.

Specifically, I request any available information regarding:

- 1. how “early stage” is defined within relevant Innovate UK assessment processes;*
- 2. the criteria used when assessing applicants considered “too early stage”;*
- 3. the proportion of rejected applications categorised as early-stage or insufficiently developed over the past five years;*
- 4. the proportion of funded applicants who already possessed:*
 - laboratory facilities,*
 - engineering teams,*
 - existing prototypes,*
 - institutional partnerships,*
 - or prior significant funding;*
- 5. whether Innovate UK or DSIT maintains internal analysis regarding barriers faced by:*
 - sole researchers,*
 - micro-enterprises,*
 - independent inventors,*
 - or unconventional scientific applicants;*
- 6. any reports, policy discussions, or reviews concerning whether current innovation structures sufficiently support exploratory or frontier-stage scientific thinking.*

If some information falls under exemption categories, I would still request partial disclosure where possible.

- 7. I would also appreciate clarification regarding whether Innovate UK assessment structures are primarily intended to support:*
 - commercially mature projects,*
 - or genuinely exploratory early-stage scientific capability.*

I request this information in the public interest regarding innovation accessibility, scientific governance, and the long-term effectiveness of UK innovation structures

Our response:

I can confirm that UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) holds some information relevant to your request. Please see the information below.

1. *how “early stage” is defined within relevant Innovate UK assessment processes;*

Innovate UK (IUK) does not apply a single formal definition of “early stage” across all programmes. The term is used contextually and typically reflects the technology readiness level (TRL), scope, and objectives of a specific funding competition rather than categorising applicants themselves. Competitions may target earlier-stage feasibility or later-stage development and commercialisation activities.

2. *the criteria used when assessing applicants considered “too early stage”;*

As noted above, IUK do not have a formal definition for “early stage” applicants, therefore this information is not held. However, applications are assessed against published competition criteria, including:

- the level of innovation
- technical feasibility
- commercial potential
- project delivery plan and capability
- value for money

Applications may be unsuccessful where they are not sufficiently developed to demonstrate feasibility, impact, or a credible delivery plan within the scope of the competition. This may include projects that are at a stage earlier than intended for that specific funding opportunity.

Applications may also be unsuccessful, if they are for fundamental research which is supported by the disciplinary research councils (Arts and Humanities Research Council, Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, Economic and Social Research Council, Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, Medical Research Council, Natural Environment Research Council, Research England, Science and Technology Facilities Council).

3. *the proportion of rejected applications categorised as early-stage or insufficiently developed over the past five years;*

Applications are not categorised in this way on the Innovation Funding Service (IFS) and therefore this information is not held.

4. *the proportion of funded applicants who already possessed:*

- *laboratory facilities,*
- *engineering teams,*
- *existing prototypes,*
- *institutional partnerships,*
- *or prior significant funding;*

Information on the applicants funded by IUK is available from [IUK Transparency Data](https://www.ukri.org/publications/innovate-uk-funded-projects-since-2004/)¹. IUK does not routinely record data on whether applicants already possess laboratory facilities, engineering teams, existing prototypes, institutional partnerships or prior funding as part of the application process. As such, Innovate UK does not hold data on these characteristics.

UKRI are not required to create information in response to an FOI request, therefore you may wish to cross reference funded applicants that are of interest with publicly and commercially available information to determine this.

¹ <https://www.ukri.org/publications/innovate-uk-funded-projects-since-2004/>

5. *whether Innovate UK or DSIT maintains internal analysis regarding barriers faced by:*

- *sole researchers,*
- *micro-enterprises,*
- *independent inventors,*
- *or unconventional scientific applicants;*

IUK does not hold specific internal analysis categorised as requested (e.g. for “sole researchers” or “independent inventors” as defined categories). However, IUK and UKRI do undertake analysis of barriers to innovation and business growth. IUK also regularly engages with other policy teams and academic researchers analysing these barriers. Examples of relevant publicly available work includes:

- Research papers published by the Innovation & Research Caucus - <https://ircaucus.ac.uk/>
- The Enterprise Research Centre research on barriers to innovation among SMEs - <https://www.enterpriseresearch.ac.uk/>
- The Innovation Growth Lab - <https://www.innovationgrowthlab.org/>

A high-level annual publication from Innovate UK which looks at barriers to innovators is the [State of Innovation Report](#)², which builds on data collected through the Innovation State of the Nation Survey.

Any requests for information held by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) should be directed to them. Details of how to make a request to DSIT can be found [here](#)³.

6. *any reports, policy discussions, or reviews concerning whether current innovation structures sufficiently support exploratory or frontier-stage scientific thinking.*

This information is not held. However, IUK’s recently published Prospectus [“Innovate UK: turning breakthrough ideas into industry giants”](#)⁴ may hold information that is of interest.

At a broader strategic level, DSIT and UKRI explicitly recognise the importance of “curiosity-driven” and foundational research, alongside commercially oriented innovation. DSIT’s R&D plans identify support for foundational science as a core funding priority.

7. *I would also appreciate clarification regarding whether Innovate UK assessment structures are primarily intended to support:*

- *commercially mature projects,*
- *or genuinely exploratory early-stage scientific capability.*

IUK’s core mission is to support business-led innovation with a clear pathway to commercialisation and economic impact. Programmes are designed to help companies develop, validate, and scale innovations that can reach market or deliver measurable societal benefit.

IUK’s funding model is designed to support a spectrum of innovation stages, rather than focusing exclusively on one or the other. These stages can include:

- early exploratory work (e.g., feasibility studies, proof-of-concept), and
- later-stage commercial development (e.g., demonstration and scale-up).

² <https://www.ukri.org/publications/state-of-innovation-2025/>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/make-a-freedom-of-information-foi-request-to-dsit>

⁴ <https://www.ukri.org/publications/turning-breakthrough-ideas-into-the-uks-next-industry-giants/>

The specific balance depends on the design of individual funding competitions. Competitions typically set out competition-specific requirements that applicants are assessed against:

- intended maturity level
- scope and eligibility criteria
- expectations regarding technical and commercial readiness

Your rights

If you have any queries regarding our response please do let us know. If you are dissatisfied with the handling of your request, you have the right to ask for an internal review, explaining which elements of this decision you disagree with and why. Internal review requests should be submitted within 40 working days of the date of our response and should be addressed to:

Head of Information Governance

Email: foi@ukri.org

Please quote the reference number above in any future communications.

If you are still not content with the outcome of the internal review, you may apply to refer the matter to the Information Commissioner for a decision. Generally, the ICO cannot make a decision unless you have exhausted the review procedure provided by UKRI. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at: www.ico.org.uk.

If you wish to raise a complaint regarding the service you have received or the conduct of any UKRI staff in relation to your request, please see [UKRI's complaints procedure](#)⁵.

Yours sincerely,

Information Governance
Information Rights Team
UK Research and Innovation
foi@ukri.org | dataprotection@ukri.org

⁵ <https://www.ukri.org/who-we-are/contact-us/make-a-complaint/#skipnav-target>