



# FUTURE OBSERVATORY PROTOTYPE GRANTS – FAQ

## Overview

### **Q: What are the Prototype Grants?**

A: Four grants of up to £70,000 to UK-based architecture and design practices to support prototype development and second-stage design research focused on sustainable supply chains.

### **Q: Who is the funding for?**

A: Small-to-medium sized design and architecture practices based in the UK.

### **Q: Which design disciplines can apply? Are certain disciplines (like architecture) favoured?**

A: All design disciplines are encouraged to apply, including, but not limited to, architecture, fashion and textiles, product and interior design, new materials, systems thinking, graphic and communications design, UX/UI, service design, animation and gaming, and interdisciplinary practices. There is no preference for one design discipline over others and the current Future Observatory research portfolio ratio should not be seen as an example of what may be funded in future.

### **Q: What types of projects are encouraged?**

A: Projects should focus on sustainable supply chains, particularly bioregional, biomaterial, and regenerative approaches. Relevant research topics might engage with retrofit, regenerative materials and systems, circular design, waste reduction and reuse, low carbon housing, agricultural byproducts or data-led tools and approaches.

## Aims and Scope

### **Q: What are the main aims of the Prototype Grants?**

A: To support development of low-carbon, bio-based, and regenerative projects or products; to explore and redesign sustainable supply chains; to enable small- and mid-sized UK design studios to scale impactful ideas; and to provide agile funding to support urgent green transition needs.

### **Q: What is meant by “second-stage development”?**

A: Projects that build on an already successful initial design or research project, advancing it to the next stage of development.



**Q: What qualifies as a “successful” first stage?**

A: The first stage should be a completed/contained and demonstrably successful phase (financially, technically, or otherwise). The second-stage proposal should clearly build on this and show meaningful progression.

**Q: I’m not sure our project is first or second stage research?**

A: Your first project must be deemed complete or contained in some way and this new proposal must show development of the original R&D stage. By “second stage” we simply mean that this research must already be established (not a new project) and now ready for advancement or scaling up to supply chain level. Please contact us via email for specific advice if you are still unsure.

**Q: Can I apply if my previous (primary) project has received funding from UKRI/AHRC?**

A: Yes. However, the proposal must show significant advancement and clear differentiation from earlier funded work. This grant cannot act as continuation funding or simply extend an existing project timeline.

**Q: Can I submit a project proposal which has already been rejected by UKRI/AHRC.**

A: No. If you are looking to submit a project that has been rejected by UKRI/AHRC previously, the proposal should be significantly changed/adapted.

**Q: Are collaborations allowed?**

A: Yes. Applications must explain how collaboration will be managed and demonstrate equitable partnership practices. One studio must lead the application.

Eligibility

**Q: Who can apply?**

A: UK-based small to mid-scale design practices that:

- Have been operating for at least one year
- Have completed at least three projects

**Q: Can we apply if we are not a design or architecture practice, but we work on relevant design projects?**

A: No. If you are not a design practice, consider collaborating with an eligible partner/research lead.

**Q: Can we apply if we are not a design studio, but a design team within a larger company?**

A: No, your principle business must be architecture or design.

**Q: We are not sure if our studio/practice qualifies as a design organisation?**



A: If you are unsure, you should write to us individually over email for advice, or consider applying with an eligible partner/research lead.

**Q: Our studio has not been running for one year, but our applicant team have the relevant experience or have worked on earlier versions of the project within another company/university. Can we still apply?**

A: No. Design studios must have been operating for one year and have evidence of previous clients/funders/customers to evidence capability to manage a budget and R&D programme.

**Q: Do the three previous projects undertaken by my design practice need to be related to the research proposal?**

A: No, these can be unrelated. However, the studio/team must have undertaken the primary/first stage research project.

**Q: What types of projects are eligible for funding?**

A: Examples include:

- New sustainable or biomaterial supply chains
- Regenerative supply chain approaches
- Circular systems
- Behaviour change communications
- Retrofit and reuse toolkits
- Low-carbon housing prototypes

**Q: Can I apply with a collaborator? Do they also need to be a design practice?**

A: You can apply with a collaborator but one design practice must be the lead. The collaborator is not subject to the same eligibility/does not have to be a design studio or architecture practice (it can be a manufacturer, for example).

**Q: Can individuals or freelancers apply?**

A: No. Applications from individuals, freelancers, or consultants are not eligible as lead applicants.

**Q: Can academic institutions apply as the lead applicant?**

A: No. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Independent Research Organisations (IROs) are not eligible to apply as the lead.

**Q: Can a design practice/studio submit multiple applications?**

A: No. Only one application per practice is permitted.

**Q: Can a collaborator/industry partner apply as part of multiple applications?**



A: Yes, so long as they are not the lead organisation. The collaborating organisation must be able to deliver multiple projects at the same time, should more than one application be successful.

### Partners and collaborators

#### **Q: Do I need an industry partner?**

A: Yes, or at least an industry advisor. An industry partner/advisor should support the project's viability. This industry advisor cannot benefit from funding (/be paid for a service). Co-funding is not necessary, but industry partners can contribute to the full economic cost of the project.

#### **Q: What is the difference between an industry partner, collaborator, and consultant?**

A:

- **Industry partner/advisor:** Necessary for the application. Provides real-world insight and validates the project's relevance and viability. They must not receive funding from the grant.
- **Collaborators:** Can contribute to the project, co-own the research results and may be funded (e.g. specialists, technical partners).
- **Consultants/contractors/suppliers:** Can be hired and paid through the grant as part of project delivery.

The key distinction is that the required industry partner must remain independent of the grant funding and act in a validating/advisory role.

#### **Q: Can collaborators or consultants be paid through the grant?**

A: Yes. The funding can include collaborator and consultant fees, provided the grant is awarded to (and funds managed by) the lead design practice.

#### **Q: Can an industry partner also be a paid consultant?**

A: No. The industry partner/advisor cannot receive funding through the grant, as their role is to independently support and validate the project. If you would like to pay a consultant, you must seek an additional industry partner/advisor who will not receive payment via the grant.

#### **Q: Does the industry partner need to be formally confirmed at the Expression of Interest?**

A: A formal agreement or letter is not required at this stage. However, you should already be in discussion with them and demonstrate genuine engagement; your industry partner/advisor must be aware of the application.

#### **Q: Can the industry partner be conceptual?**

A: No, they must be aware of your application and must sign a letter of support (this does not have to be financial) in the second stage of application.



**Q: What happens if we can't identify an industry partner? Can you help us to find one?**

A: This is a requirement of the application and Future Observatory cannot pair you with a partner. The industry partner/advisor should be able to vouch for your project or be interested/invested in its outcome.

**Q: Can a university be involved in a project?**

A: Yes, universities can be collaborators or industry partners, but the majority of expertise should be within the design studio, as well as the majority of funds spent by the lead practice. We would expect the funding to benefit the lead design practice and the research be owned, or at least co-owned, by the practice.

**Q: Can a local council be involved in a project?**

A: Yes, local councils can be collaborators or industry partners. Once again, the funding should benefit the lead design practice and the research be owned by the practice.

**Q: Do you favour applications with multiple collaborators?**

A: No, the research project can be undertaken by one design practice – the minimum requirement is an industry partner/advisor.

International projects and collaborations

**Q: Can I apply as a non-UK lead?**

A: No, the lead organisation must be based in the UK.

**Q: Can we collaborate with non-UK partners?**

A: Yes, but proportionately, with the majority of activity and research expertise based in the UK.

**Q: Can we apply with a proposal which is based outside of the UK? For example, a international demonstrator building?**

A: No, the majority of research activity must be based in the UK and the research outcomes must be UK-based. We acknowledge that supply chains can extend beyond the UK, and international consultants/contractors can be paid for relevant services within reason and proportionally. The research outputs/projects must be in the UK.

Funding and Costs

**Q: How much funding is available?**

A: Up to £70,000



- Small enterprises will be awarded £70,000
- Medium enterprises will be awarded £60,000

**Q: Is co-funding required?**

A: Yes. Projects must reach a Full Economic Cost (FEC) of £100,000:

- Small enterprises must make a £30,000 contribution
- Medium enterprises must make a £40,000 contribution

**Q: Can the full economic cost of my project be more than £100,000.**

A: Yes, but funding cannot constitute extension funding of an existing/on-going project. If there is additional funding/in-kind support, please include details in the Expression of Interest. If the project has a significantly larger funding pot, the applicant must evidence that they are the lead researcher/owner and that funding will benefit the design studio as well as other partners.

**Q: What form can co-funding take?**

A: It can be financial contributions, in-kind support (e.g. staff time, overheads), or a combination. These can be made by the design practice itself (eg. financial or donating staff time) or from a partner/collaborator (eg. funding or in-kind consultancy fees, equipment and materials).

**Q: How will funds be awarded/paid by Future Observatory?**

A: Quarterly payments.

**Q: Can I charge VAT when claiming grant funding?**

A: No Future Observatory and AHRC research and development grants are not a payment for a service, they are provided without expectation of any return to the Design Museum or Future Observatory. Grant funding lies entirely outside the scope of VAT, any costs claimed must be net of VAT.

**Q: How do I provide budget information?**

A: All application costs should be at current prices, inclusive of VAT and other taxes where applicable. Do not include inflation.

**Q: Where should I submit budget and timeline in the Expression of Interest form?**

A: In section 9, “Deliverables and Timeline” (or section 5, “Proposal Summary” if you need further wordcount).

Fundable costs

**Q: What are some examples of fundable costs?**



A: Items we will fund as part of this grant (or which can be reasonably described as in-kind contributions):

- Personnel costs; researchers, technicians and other supporting staff to the extent employed on the project.
- Costs of equipment and instruments, to the extent employed on the project.
- Costs of buildings and land, to the extent and for the duration period used for the project.
- Costs of conducting research and of external consultancy and contractual research or other knowledge assets, including patents bought or licensed from outside sources.
- Any other project operating costs and project overheads; including costs of materials, supplies and similar products, incurred directly as a result of the project.

**Q: Are demonstrators or prototypes acceptable outcomes?**

A: Yes. Demonstrators and prototypes are encouraged as they support real-world application of research.

**Q: Can this grant fund continuation of an existing project?**

A: No. The project must represent a significant step forward rather than a continuation or extension of previous work. The £100,000 cannot supplement an existing grant proposal/a body of research currently underway or act as continuation funding/extension of deadline.

**Q: What is not eligible for funding?**

A: The programme does not fund:

- New or discovery research projects
- First-stage or primary, desk-based research
- Intellectual property filings (e.g. patents)
- Previously rejected applications without substantial revision

**Q: Will you fund some desk-based research?**

A: Some if relevant, but the grant is for second-stage research at supply chain level and we expect proposals to have real world impact.

**Q: Can collaborators be paid from the grant? Can Industry partners/advisors be paid from the grant?**

A: Collaborators and consultants may be funded, as long as the lead design practice receives and manages the grant. The exception is the industry partner/advisor, who cannot benefit from funding/be paid from the grant.

Intellectual Property and Ownership

**Q: Who owns the intellectual property (IP) generated through the project?**



A: The intellectual property will be owned by the applying design practice. Future Observatory and the Design Museum do not take ownership of IP. We would not expect another company/collaborator to benefit from IP or ownership unless co-owned with the lead design practice.

### Application Process

#### **Q: What are the stages of the application process?**

A: Two stage:

1. Expression of Interest (EOI)
2. Shortlisting, mentor pairing, and second-stage application

Followed by a final jury panel

#### **Q: What does the Expression of Interest require?**

A: A brief application (up to 1000 words) including:

- Proposal summary
- Desired impact
- Project history and partners
- Team background
- Deliverables and timeline

#### **Q: Are supporting materials allowed?**

A: Yes, applicants may submit up to three images, audio, or video files.

#### **Q: Are external links allowed in the application?**

A: Website links are permitted, but only for reference; reviewers cannot guarantee to scroll through the entirety of a website linked in an application. Links to password-protected or downloadable files, or documents exceeding the word limit are not permitted/will not be viewed or downloaded.

#### **Q: Can I get individual feedback before applying? Can I schedule an individual phone call?**

A: One-to-one advisory sessions (in-person or over the phone) are not offered, but applicants can submit questions via email and attend webinars.

#### **Q: What materials/information is available online?**

A: The Prototype Grant webpages on the Future Observatory website, plus application pack and Expression of Interest Form. There will be two webinars held with presentations and a live Q&A.

#### **Q: Can I request a video recording or transcript of the webinar.**

A: We will not release the video or transcript, but we will publish a summary Q&A document online.



**Q: Can I request individual feedback if I am unsuccessful?**

A: We are unable to provide individual feedback for unsuccessful applications. Shortlisted candidates will be paired with a mentor (and will receive feedback) in order to submit a second, lengthier application. All applicants would be shortlisted to second stage will receive feedback.

Shortlisting and Second Stage

**Q: What happens if I am shortlisted?**

A: Shortlisted applicants will:

- Be paired with a mentor
- Develop a second-stage application over two months
- Receive £3,000 to support application development

**Q: What does the second-stage application include?**

A:

- Detailed proposal summary
- Deliverables and outputs
- Desired impact
- Project history and partners
- Team/practice background and CVs/testimonials
- Industry partner statement
- Collaborators/partner statements
- Timeline Gant chart
- Itemised budget

**Q: How are you ensuring that smaller studios are being considered for funding alongside larger, more experienced practices?**

A: We will assess applications on the strength of the proposal and the ability of the team to deliver that proposal. We are also considering value for money and impact. We acknowledge that funding opportunities for architecture and design practices are scarce and we want to support small to mid-scale practices where real-world change can be made – at any scale.

**Q: How will applications be assessed?**

A: EOI applications are scored on:

- Quality and relevance of proposal (30%)
- Team capacity (30%)
- Impact potential (30%)



- Value for money (10%)

**Q: What are the key dates?**

A:

- Applications open: 6 May 2026
- EOI deadline: 12 June 2026
- Shortlisting: 26 June 2026
- Second-stage deadline: 28 August 2026
- Awards announced: 18 September 2026
- Project start: by 1 November 2026

Project Delivery

**Q: How long do projects last?**

A: The duration of these awards will be nine months. Projects must start by 1 November 2026 and end by 31 July 2026.

**Q: Can my project run for longer than nine months? Can my project start earlier/later?**

A: No, the research period is set and not flexible.

**Q: What are the reporting requirements?**

A: Awardees must:

- Meet bi-monthly with Future Observatory
- Submit quarterly reports on progress and financial spend

Outputs, Promotion and Exhibitions

**Q: Do you expect a physical prototype as an outcome? Does this help my application?**

A: No, research results may be a publication, an event, a toolkit, a demonstrator or other output. Future Observatory and the jury panel will not favour an application that has an exhibitable output.

**Q: Will funded projects be exhibited or showcased?**

A: There is no guarantee of a dedicated display, but Future Observatory will aim to showcase projects within their public programme where relevant.

**Q: Where might projects be featured in the Future Observatory programme?**

A:



- Future Observatory exhibitions or displays at the Design Museum
- Publications and journal
- Website and digital platforms
- Public programme talks and events

**Q: Should I budget for exhibition outputs?**

A: No. Exhibition outcomes are not required, although prototypes may naturally lend themselves to display. Future Observatory may commission additional film or translational objects, which you do not need to budget for. Including this element in your budget will not enhance your application or guarantee an exhibition.

**Q: Can the grant go towards redesigning an existing manufacturer's system?**

A: Yes. We would expect the existing manufacturer to be involved in the application.

**Q: Is an application stronger if we exhibit multiple/a range of applications (for example, of material innovation) or one application in more detail?**

A: We have no preference.