



System Partners Investment: Growth & Innovation Fund

Consultation Supporting Information
July - September 2026

Background

In October 2025, Sport NI consulted on the development of the System Partners Investment (SPI) Programme, which included 'Research & Innovation' as a standalone Programme within the SPI Portfolio.

- *'Research & Innovation – Empowers organisations to explore bold ideas, test new models, and collaborate across sectors to deliver innovative, scalable solutions.'*

In February 2026, Sport NI Board approved the Business Case for the 2026-27 financial year (SNI/2006/03), which included c£450k of funding for the development of a Growth and Innovation Fund.

Sport NI operates within an increasingly complex and evolving sporting environment, characterised by changing participation trends, financial pressures, digital transformation, and heightened expectations around inclusion and demonstrating impact.

There remains a clear need for a flexible and responsive funding mechanism that complements core investment by enabling organisations to test innovative ideas, respond to emerging challenges, and accelerate growth opportunities.

While the SPI Programme funding supports core delivery, it does not always provide sufficient scope for:

- Innovation and experimentation.
- Rapid response to emerging needs.
- Cross-sector collaboration.
- Development of new market opportunities.

It is therefore proposed that the **System Partner Investment - Growth & Innovation Fund** is specifically designed to fill this gap by providing targeted, time-bound investment that promotes innovation, learning, and scalability.

The Fund will be designed to align with SPI Programme Outcomes for increasing participation and improved retention and key Sport NI priorities including:

- Increasing lifelong participation in sport and physical activity.
- Strengthening organisational capability within the sector.
- Enhancing inclusion and reducing inequalities.
- Supporting system-wide innovation and sustainability.

The Fund will also deliver additionality by:

- Supporting activity that would not otherwise take place.
- Encouraging new partnerships and delivery models.
- Generating learning and insight to inform future investment.

Growth and Innovation Fund

The proposed **Growth and Innovation Fund** will support partners to deliver system growth and / or test innovative approaches that challenge the norm in an ever-changing sporting landscape.

The fund will use **National Lottery** investment of c£450k to support initiatives across three areas:

- Strand 1: Insight
- Strand 2: Growth
- Strand 3: Innovation

In the first round of investments which will commence during 2026-27 the fund will focus on projects that have a focus on **participation** and or **system development**.

The first round of investments will **not** support projects with a **pathway / performance** focus but future rounds may include these areas.

The proposed fund will support revenue and capital costs (where deemed essential for the project) but will **not** support direct staffing costs.

Strands, Routes, & Eligibility

Strands

Strand 1: Insight – supports development of insight to address growth issues.

Strand 2: Growth – supports projects seeking to increase participation; increase coaching / volunteering; and/or system development.

Strand 3: Innovation – supports projects which have new & innovative ideas, approaches, or technologies ; (these may include but not limited to digital, social, economical, or environmental sustainability).

Routes

Route 1: Short Term Projects - up to £10,000 for 3 to 12 months.

Route 2: Medium Term Projects - up to £30,000 for 9 to 18 months.

Eligibility

The fund is open to:

- a) organisations currently in receipt of National Lottery System Partners Investment (SPI).
 - Organisations who have **achieved** their SSIGB 2025-26 targets will be eligible for either Strand 1, 2 or 3.
 - Organisations who **did not** meet their SSIGB 2025-26 targets will **only** be eligible for Strand 1 / Route 1.
- b) Recognised National Governing Bodies not currently in receipt of SPI, may apply for Strand 2 / Route 1 investment.

Collaboration

Sport NI will look favourably at organisations who come together to maximise outcomes and impact.

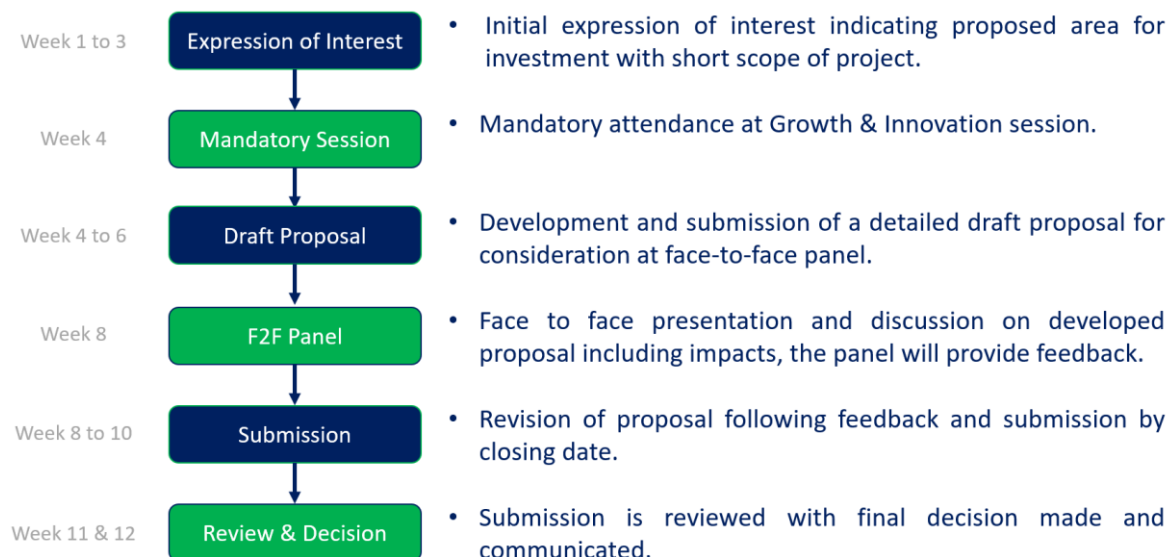
Principles

To guide Sport NI's work in delivering the Growth and Innovation Fund and ensuring it is aligned to the System Partners investment, it is proposed to apply six principles to the fund. The principles aim to reflect the role, context and values / principles of Sport NI and align where appropriate.

- **Strategic Alignment** - projects must align with SPI outcomes.
- **Additionality** - projects must deliver additionality and demonstrate value for money.
- **Innovation** – developed projects must be new, creative, or support transformative ideas.
- **Impact** – projects must be scalable and able to deliver long-term environmental, economic, and social sustainability.
- **Governance** – projects must be delivered in line with safeguarding, equality and regulatory compliance.
- **Monitoring & Evaluation** - Projects must track progress, measure impact, and use insights to improve future investment decisions. Findings will be shared across the sport system

Submission Process & Timeline

The Growth & Innovation Fund will look to deliver investment across the period 2026-28. It will look to deliver a series of 'rounds' of investment during this period. Each round will last approximately 12 weeks from initial expression of interest through to review & decision.



An eight week period of consultation will take place from July to September 2026. Following this the initial proposals will be revised and final approval for the programme will be sought.