



Foundations 2026 Call



Guidance for Applicants



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1. Introduction

This is the second Foundations funding call launched by CreaTech Frontiers. Like the previous one, this call is aimed at freelancers, microbusinesses and SMEs in the West Midlands. We want to support truly innovative ideas and the development of innovative content, products and services using creative technologies.

The budget for this call is £200,000, and we will be awarding 20 grants of £10,000 each. The grants will be complemented by a dedicated Research and Development (R&D) programme designed in collaboration with the grant holder, and involving academics, technologists and experts from CreaTech Frontiers core partners – Birmingham City University, Coventry University, the University of Birmingham, the University of Warwick, Royal Shakespeare Company, Digital Catapult – and from CreaTech Frontiers [industry partners](#).

2. What we are looking for

The aim of this call is to allow the most innovative ideas, concepts and prototypes to flourish. The funding allows applicants to test ideas that could not be tested otherwise: building a prototype, establishing whether an approach is technically viable, interrogating a creative or commercial assumption before committing to it. Proposals that end in a well-documented negative result are as valuable as those that end in a tangible final product. Every project involves both a technology stack and an application domain. We ask you about both, to help us assign appropriate assessors and match academic expertise after the award.

Capabilities that your project develops or applies:

1. **Interaction, interface and experience design** — user interface and experience design, accessibility technologies, audience interaction and response.
2. **Immersive and spatial media** — extended reality, immersive and spatial audio, haptics and other embodied interfaces.
3. **Real-time production tools** — game engines used for any purpose, virtual production, motion and object capture, real-time rendering pipelines.
4. **Artificial intelligence and data for creative work** — machine learning models, creative and cultural datasets, assisted production workflows.
5. **Networks, platforms and distribution** — future networks and cloud infrastructure, distribution and audience platforms, rights, provenance and monetisation systems, advertising technology.

Application domain of your project:

1. **Games and interactive entertainment**
2. **Screen and moving image** – film, television, animation and visual effects.
3. **Live performance** – including music, theatre, dance and hybrid live formats.
4. **Museums, heritage and visual arts**
5. **Creative services to other sectors** – creative applications developed for other sectors of the creative industries and the regional economy.



3. Examples of previously funded projects

Gaming: a social-connected play experience that extends gaming into everyday life.

A shared virtual world where families and friends can meet, play and create together regardless of distance. Interactive mini-games, spatial voice chat and customisable avatars support meaningful connection, turning gameplay into a social ritual rather than a solitary activity. The experience demonstrates how game mechanics can be repurposed for wellbeing, communication and intergenerational engagement.

Immersive: an augmented-reality heritage journey that layers digital storytelling onto physical space.

Visitors explore a real-world location while AR overlays spatial narratives, immersive audio and responsive visual effects that reveal hidden histories. As people move, the story unfolds around them — characters appear, environments shift and soundscapes adapt to their path. This example shows how immersive technology can deepen cultural understanding and transform passive learning into embodied exploration.

Live Performance: a hybrid opera experience that blends human performance with real-time generative media.

Live singers are accompanied by AI-driven face morphing, multi-camera capture and dynamic visual compositions that respond to the performers' movement and voice. The stage becomes a fluid canvas where digital imagery evolves with the music, enhancing emotional impact without overshadowing the performers. This example illustrates how emerging technologies can extend traditional performance languages and create new aesthetic possibilities.

Screen: a digital pre-production environment that streamlines creative planning for film, TV and advertising.

Storyboarding, animatics, shot-planning and workflow tools integrated into a single collaborative platform. Creatives can sketch scenes, test camera moves, map production schedules and iterate rapidly before stepping onto set. By visualising decisions early, the experience reduces production time, improves communication across departments and demonstrates how digital tools can transform traditional screen-based workflows.

Visual Arts: an interactive textile-based installation where physical materials respond to audience presence.

Projection mapping, embedded sensors and sculptural textiles blend to create artworks that shift colour, pattern and movement as visitors approach. Digital layers merge with handcrafted elements, exploring themes of identity, heritage and belonging through responsive visual expression. The piece shows how creative-tech practices can expand visual arts into dynamic, participatory experiences.



4. Key dates

- 4th September 2026 - Application submission opens
- **5th October 2026, 12:00 noon BST** - Application submission deadline
- December 2026 - Applicants informed of review outcome
- January 2027 - Contracts to successful grant recipients
- February 2027 - R&D activity starts
- July 2027 - R&D activity ends

5. Eligibility

1. You must be a freelancer, microbusiness or SME.
2. You must be aged 18 or over.
3. You must have a registered address in the West Midlands region as shown on the map below (including Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Herefordshire, Sandwell, Shropshire, Solihull, Staffordshire, Stoke on Trent, Telford and Wrekin, Walsall, Warwickshire, Wolverhampton and Worcestershire).
4. You have not been awarded a CreaTech Frontiers Grant before.
5. You are not currently a full-time academic staff member in a university.

Lead applicant will act as the single point of contact for the project throughout the application and assessment process. We particularly encourage applications from individuals who are Black, Asian or from other ethnically diverse backgrounds, disabled people, and those from socio-economically disadvantaged communities — as well as companies led by or primarily serving these groups. We would also welcome applications from counties less represented in our first funding round: Herefordshire, Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin, Worcestershire, and the Black Country.



Figure 1 Map of West Midlands Region

6. Application requirements

Eligibility will be assessed based on the information provided in the form. Please submit the following supporting evidence with your application:

- All applicants (companies or individuals)
Proof of address within the West Midlands region dated within the last three months (e.g. utility bill, bank statement, or council tax letter)
- Individuals
Evidence of your Unique Taxpayer Reference (UTR). You can check if you already have your UTR [here](#). If you don't have an UTR, please register [here](#) for Self-Assessment with HMRC as soon as possible, as it can take up to 15 days to receive your UTR.

7. Submission

The deadline for submission of the application is 5th October at 12 noon. Please submit your application through the CreaTech Frontiers [application portal](#). You will need to register as a New Applicant the first time you access the form. This will allow you to save, close the form and return to it later before submitting. If you encounter any technical issue, please notify us as soon as possible before the fund closes and keep any proof showing the technical issue and your submission.



8. After Submission

Initially, we will check your application against the eligibility criteria for the call. In the unlikely case that you are not eligible we will let you know straight away and guide you towards further support and forthcoming CreaTech Frontiers funding calls.

Eligible applications will follow a two-stage review and selection process:

1. Review of applications by panels of two members, composed by one academic and one innovation expert

A shortlisting panel composed of independent industry representatives, academics and business innovation experts will recommend 20 proposals for funding.

Reviewers will score applications as follows:

Main assessment criteria (75%)

- How innovative is the idea? (50%)
- How feasible is the proposal? (25%)

Additional assessment criteria (25%)

- Have elements of responsible innovation, EDI, and sustainability been considered, and how?

Every successful applicant will be matched with academic expertise from across the CreaTech Frontiers consortium — Birmingham City University, Coventry University, the University of Birmingham, and the University of Warwick. Matching takes place after award, on the basis of a needs analysis with the cluster's team about what the project actually needs. Applicants are not required to identify or approach an academic partner before applying, and proposals will not be assessed on whether they have done so.

9. Eligible costs

- Project development, paid development and training time for freelancers
- Planning, research and idea development
- Materials and equipment
- Purchase or rental of materials, equipment, software licences and other technical tools
- Payment to collaborators, mentors, technical support and other professionals involved in the project
- Training fees
- Formal or informal support or learning related to the project
- Travel, accommodation and subsistence
- Collaborations, residencies, attending relevant events, workshops or project-related activities
- Venue hire



- Studios or spaces required for project development
- Access and inclusion
- Costs that support accessible, diverse and inclusive audience engagement and participation (e.g. sign language interpreters, captioning, creating accessible formats, etc).

Access provisions for applicants such as support workers, interpreters and travel costs associated with removing barriers to working do not need to be included in this budget. We will ask all successful applicants for details of their access requirements at the start of the programme, and work with them to ensure the proper resources are in place.



Annex 1. Useful tips on preparing your application

When describing your project, aim to keep it clear and focused. Someone reading or watching your application should quickly understand what you want to do, why it matters, and how it fits the aims of the CreaTech Frontiers Foundations Call.

A strong application will:

- Clearly explain what you want to develop or test
- Show alignment to cluster themes
- Demonstrate why your project represents frontier innovation
- Outline the expected commercial or economic impact of your project
- Engage convincingly with responsible innovation, EDI, and/or sustainability

Examples:

We will prototype a VR-enabled theatre experience where audiences interact with live performers in real time through gaze and movement tracking. This tests how audience behaviour can shape narrative outcomes.

✓ INNOVATIVE

Introduces a new interaction model; tests something uncertain

We will create an immersive theatre experience using VR headsets to present a 360° story to audiences.

✗ NOT INNOVATIVE

Uses familiar technology in a standard way; audience remains passive; no clear experimentation

We will use projection mapping in a live performance.

✗ NOT INNOVATIVE

We will develop a system where projection mapping responds in real time to performers' biometric data, testing how physiological signals can shape visual storytelling.

✓ INNOVATIVE



Strong example:

This project explores how real-time sounds coming from the environment and the audience can shape a live dance performance. Using microphone and speaker arrays, novel spatial audio algorithms, and dynamic mapping strategies, environment sounds control lighting, sound diffusion, and projected visuals, with performers responding dynamically. The project will prototype a system for responsive environments suitable for small-scale touring.

Why it's strong:

- ✓ Clear and easy to understand
- ✓ Strong idea expressed in a few sentences
- ✓ Shows how audiences actively participate
- ✓ Explains the role of technology
- ✓ Uses specific terms (e.g. spatial audio, mapping strategies)
- ✓ Follows a clear structure: idea → technology → outcome

Weak example:

This project will create an immersive dance performance using new technologies. It will explore how audiences can experience dance in different ways. Tools such as projection and sound will be used to enhance the performance.

Why it's weak:

- ✗ Too vague ("new technologies", "different ways")
- ✗ No clear explanation of what is being tested
- ✗ Audience interaction is unclear
- ✗ Lacks a clear focus



Annex 2. Frequently Asked Questions

Eligibility

Who is this for?

The CreaTech Frontiers **Foundations 2026** call is designed for SMEs, micro-businesses and freelancers in the West Midlands region that wish to develop their projects through research and development (R&D) in collaboration with academics from four universities.

Can CICs and charities apply?

Community Interest Companies can apply. Charities can be involved in a project as collaborators but can only apply for funding if they also have company status.

Can individuals apply?

Yes, we welcome applications from individuals who have a unique tax reference (UTR) and are based in the West Midlands region.

Can academics apply?

The Foundations 2026 call is about opening up our universities to freelancers and companies that may have never collaborated with academics before. If you are a founder but also a full-time university employee, you are not eligible for this call. You may be eligible for future calls.

Can previous CreaTech Frontiers grant holders apply?

The Foundations 2026 call is intended as the first entry point for freelancers and companies with no previous experience of R&D collaborations. You cannot apply to the Foundations 2026 call if you have received a grant of up to £10,000 in the Foundations 2025 call, or one of the £25,000 grants in the Live & Immersive Innovation call.

What areas are covered by the West Midlands region?

The six counties of the West Midlands region are Herefordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, West Midlands county, and Worcestershire. Postcodes in any of these six counties, including all local authorities areas included in the region, are eligible.

I am a registered company/ individual outside the West Midlands region. Can I still apply or are there other opportunities for me?

No, only registered companies and individuals resident in the West Midlands region as defined above can apply.

I have not received any funding before for my work, can I apply?



Yes, this is one of our key priorities. We fully encourage applications from eligible SMEs, micro-businesses and freelancers who have not yet had the opportunity to apply for funding or may be from underrepresented or under-supported areas of the West Midlands.

Application Process

How many times can I apply over the course of the 5-year cluster programme?

You can apply to more than one funding call over the 5 years of the cluster. Please remember that you can only submit one application within any funding call.

Can I be named on other applications as a freelancer?

Yes, you can be named on multiple applications in a freelance capacity. The main applicant would need to clearly outline your role within their project proposal.

I applied to the previous Foundations call, but was unsuccessful. Can I resubmit the same project again?

Yes, you are able to reapply for this call with the same project. We would expect your proposal to be considerably improved, and, where relevant, to have addressed the feedback from the reviewers.

If I am unsuccessful this time, will there be other opportunities for funding or support through CreaTech Frontiers?

Yes, we will offer unsuccessful applicants support in the forms of events and workshops and we will be running more funding calls over the next three years of the CreaTech Frontiers cluster programme. We aim to provide you with constructive feedback on your grant application, signpost potential collaborators or networks, and help you shape and refine your project ideas.

What about Intellectual Property (IP)?

All participating companies and individuals based in the West Midlands will retain the Foreground IP they develop during their R&D collaborations funded by CreaTech Frontiers. Our aim is to build a sustainable and prosperous createch cluster in the West Midlands - to see new businesses emerge and existing businesses grow.

Can the supply chain for my project be outside the region?

Some elements can be external (e.g. specialised technical expertise or services), but the benefits of the R&D impact for the West Midlands region must be clearly demonstrated and evidenced.

Is there a required Minimum Viable Product (MVP)?

No.

Can a CreaTech Frontiers core partner participate in grant applications? Can they be named as a partner?



No, existing CreaTech Frontiers core partners (Birmingham City University, Coventry University, Digital Catapult, Royal Shakespeare Company, University of Birmingham and University of Warwick) cannot apply for grants or receive payments from the grants awarded to a grant recipient.

Can a CreaTech Frontiers industry partner* apply?

Yes, but only if they are not a direct recipient of the AHRC grant to deliver a specific activity as outlined in the original funding submission.

Can a CreaTech Frontiers industry partner* participate in a grant application? Can they be named as a collaborator?

Yes, but please consider the following. If you are already working with an organisation who is a CreaTech Frontiers industry partner, you should outline clearly within the grant application the existing relationship and how the collaboration will support R&D innovation. How would the R&D grant enable you to move to the next step, and how will it add value to your existing collaboration? If the industry partner is receiving funding directly from CreaTech Frontiers to deliver a specific activity as outlined in the original funding submission, then the grant applicant should clearly outline how this collaboration on R&D activity is above and beyond that activity.

Academic Support

How do we find academic support?

We will negotiate with successful applicants the appropriate R&D plan and academic support for their project.

Is academic support free for companies and freelancers?

Yes, academic support for collaborative R&D is provided at no cost to the companies or the freelancers and in addition to the grant. The number of days of support will vary depending on the R&D needs of the project. This will be outlined to applicants if they are successfully awarded a grant. Please note that academic support is strictly for collaborative R&D. Academics are available to provide guidance, specialist expertise, and strategic advice; however, they will not be responsible for the direct development or technical execution of the project on your behalf.

What facilities are available to use at the four universities?

* As of 24 August 2026: Advantage Creative, Ars Electronica (Linz), BIMM University, Birmingham City Council, Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, Birmingham Opera Company, Birmingham Royal Ballet, Birmingham Open Media, Capture, Central Conservatory of Music (Beijing), Cheltenham Festivals, Covatic, Coventry City Council, Create Central, Creative UK, Culture Central, DESiblit, Future Screens NI, Hollywood Gaming, Holosphere, Reach, Rebellion, South by Southwest, Tech West Midlands, The Repertory Theatre, Totem Learning, Vodafone, West Midlands Combined Authority.



Successful applicants will have access to a network of four CreaTech Frontiers complementary labs, acting as interconnected hubs for collaborative R&D, including world-class facilities and computing infrastructure:

- Birmingham City University, CreaTech Frontiers Lab at STEAMhouse and other spaces at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire and Parkside (immersive video and audio, motion capture, world building, high-end recording studios and performance venues)
- University of Coventry, Labs in the Delia Derbyshire building (virtual production and immersive)
- University of Birmingham, Transformative Humanities Lab (AI and ML for creative applications)
- University of Warwick, Fusion Lab (Gaming, esports, and animation)

Access to the Labs will be determined through discussion between the grant recipient, academic and technical support team after the grant has been allocated. Technical support in the labs will be available for the duration of the R&D collaborations.

Please note that access to facilities and technical support is on a bookable basis and remains subject to availability.

Funding

Can freelancers be funded, especially if they are out of the region?

Freelancers from outside of the West Midlands region can be supported by a West Midlands based grant recipient, but the regional impact must be clear. Where these types of collaboration are known at the time of submitting your application, you should outline details of the support and why there is a requirement to work with a freelancer from outside of the region.

Can I pay myself from the grant funding?

Yes, you can pay yourself and use some of the grant to cover your time to undertake R&D collaborations. You should outline in your application why this approach is required and how it will enable the R&D activity to happen that may otherwise not be possible. The grant cannot be used to support 'business as usual' activity.

Is the grant taxable?

The grant is not taxable.

Is the grant subject to subsidy control rules?

The funding is subject to subsidy control – "Minimal Financial Assistance" (MFA). You must not exceed £315,000 in government funding over three fiscal years. You will be required to state if you are/are not within your subsidy control limit at the time of application.



What insurance and risk assessments are required?

This will depend on your project – details will be confirmed with each technician team in the specific Lab location that you will be using. Undertaking R&D activity within a university campus will require risk assessments to be undertaken in advance of R&D work commencing. You should be able to evidence that you have public liability insurance cover.

What documentation will you need from me when I am awarded?

As a minimum, the documentation we expect to ask you for will include:

Grant Agreement Terms and Conditions: Project Lead will be required to sign and return a Grant Offer Letter before any grant can be disbursed or any costs can be claimed on the project.

Nominated contacts: We will ask you to confirm a project contact (for operational day-to-day delivery of the project) and, where applicable, a finance contact (responsible for supplying any additional information required to complete financial due diligence checks or to address queries on the budget, and who will authorise submission of financial claims).

Supplier form, bank account and other financial details as necessary: in order that we can set up payments to you we will need to set you up as a supplier. We will also ask for assurance or evidence of other sources of match funding identified in your budget.

Payments, financial claims: Costs are only eligible if they are incurred and paid between the project start and end dates. We will provide you with a spending summary report and guidance on submitting this to us. Our first payment of 80% of the grant is in advance, on signature of contract. Our final payment of the remaining 20% will be in arrears on submission of your final report.

Document retention and audit: You should have financial systems in place to retain all records relating to a project for at least ten years after it finishes. We may visit you to review these records, or ask you provide further supporting evidence to satisfy requests under our own regulations or audits from CreaTech Frontiers Cluster programme funders – this is often at short notice.

Am I required to evidence my spend at the end of the project?

At the end of the R&D activity, you will have to submit a spending summary report together with the receipts as evidence of spending. A review will be taken on the grant spend against the original budget submitted at the application stage, to ensure costs align to activity undertaken. Minor budget adjustments are allowed with reasonable explanations.

What happens to the funding if I have not spent the funds awarded to me by the project end date (expected to be in July 2027)?

If you believe that you will not spend your grant by the project end date, you will need to talk to the CreaTech Frontiers Team as soon as possible to discuss in detail if there is a realistic date within the next 4-week period by which you will have spent the grant. If this is not possible, the remaining grant will be withdrawn.



Review Process and Outcome

Who will review my application?

Each application will be reviewed by specialist academics and innovation experts from the core partners and by independent industry representatives.

What feedback will be provided to unsuccessful applicants?

Each application will have two completed reviews, and these will be provided to all unsuccessful applicants.

Can I appeal a decision or provide feedback on my project outcome?

If you believe there are sufficient grounds to appeal the decision of the reviewers, please email grants@createchfrontiers.com in the first instance. As part of our commitment to responsible innovation, we aim to provide transparency in our processes. We therefore welcome feedback on any stage within the application process. CreaTech Frontiers is here to support, develop and encourage the createch ecosystem, so your feedback at any time is highly valued by the team.

If you require further guidance during the submission period, please sign up for our [events](#) or contact the CreaTech Frontiers team at grants@createchfrontiers.com.

What is CreaTech Frontiers?

CreaTech Frontiers is a creative industries cluster funded by a 5-year, £7.2m grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). We aim to establish a thriving createch ecosystem across the West Midlands by developing skills and talent, funding collaborative R&D, and supporting business innovation.

Led by Birmingham City University, CreaTech Frontiers is delivered by a consortium of six core partners that includes Coventry University, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the University of Birmingham, the University of Warwick, and Digital Catapult. An impressive array of industry and regional partners have also committed their full support in delivering our objectives.