

Creative Industries Clusters 2 FAQ document

Thank you for your interest in the next wave of the Creative Industries Clusters. This is a fantastic opportunity for partnerships between academia and industry that spans a breadth of places and disciplines.

As a funder, AHRC has a responsibility to preserve the integrity and fairness of our application and assessment processes. Therefore, unfortunately, we are unable to meet with individuals or organisations to discuss application scoping and development.

However, if you do have any call-specific questions, please contact us at creative@ahrc.ukri.org or consult our FAQs document, which we will soon be publishing.

Kind regards,
Creative Industries Team, AHRC

Sub-sector

What is meant by ‘prioritising new geographies and sub-sectors of the creative industries? Within our institution there is discussion of a project in a sub-sector previously covered by a cluster.

We want to broaden the sectors that have been covered by the clusters. There is a natural interest in sub-sectors that haven't already been funded, but if your proposal is very strong that will be considered and will fit into our portfolio balancing approach. For example, although the [Music Futures](#) cluster has already received funding, the music sector itself is vast and varied. There remain many underexplored areas within music that could be addressed through targeted R&D activity. What matters most is the clarity and strength of your proposal: it should clearly tell us **what the challenge is for the sub-sector in your region.**

If a geographic area has previously hosted a cluster, would a new application led by a different higher education institution (HEI) and focused on a different creative industries sub-sector still be eligible? Or is AHRC prioritising regions that have not received any cluster funding to date?

We are looking for new geographies and/or new sub-sectors, so it would be eligible. We are likely to carry out some portfolio balancing as interest has been incredibly high. This should not discourage you from applying to the outline stage.

Most of the previous clusters have a focus on one or two creative industries sub-sectors (music, fashion, or film). Can a bid look at support for the creative industries as a whole?

Yes, we would accept a cluster supporting the creative industries as a whole.

Are you looking at extensions of existing clusters?

No, we aren't looking to extend existing clusters.

Are you expecting to announce any themes when the call goes live? Some themes were mentioned in the [AHRC Clusters 2 blog](#), but not in the webinar.

We are adopting an open approach, recognising that the creative industries vary across the UK and that different regions demonstrate distinct strengths.

Therefore, we may offer some guidance or thematic focus around sub-sectors that have not previously received funding, and we reserve the right to balance the portfolio accordingly. However, we are not limiting the scope of this call.

You mentioned that you want to encourage interdisciplinary work. Can you explain more about that given the sector-specific focus of the clusters?

We actively welcome interdisciplinary clusters. While some may focus on specific sub-sectors, we recognise that the creative industries draw on a broad mix of skills and interconnectivity —from digital technologies and engineering to computing, making them inherently interdisciplinary.

Our ambition is to expand the scope of clusters and the sectors they engage with. Creative technologies increasingly influence diverse areas, and we're particularly interested in proposals that demonstrate natural links to other sectors within a region. We welcome ideas that explore how creative methodologies can address challenges beyond the traditional boundaries of the sector.

We also value strong cross-disciplinary relationships that align with other parts of [UKRI](#). These connections will be an important factor in our funding decisions, as we aim to support clusters capable of delivering impact across multiple sectors.

If AHRC are keen to see where creative tech, creative thinking and creative methodology is applied to other sectors, how will success in terms of growth be measured?

What if the growth is within another sector, for example, advanced manufacturing – will this still be considered growth within the creative industries?

We will work closely with our colleagues within our other UKRI councils to consider the metrics we ask you to report on. This would also be affected by the percent split of the remit, for example whether it is 50/50 or 70/30.

Growth in another sector would be considered 'attributable to' the creative industries. We are really interested in exploring and understanding what that growth would look like.

Geography

How narrowly or broadly are you defining a cluster in geographic terms?

AHRC is not defining geographies; it is up to the cluster to define the relevant area.

Is a regional proposal viable? For example, the whole of the north?

Yes, a regional proposal would be acceptable

Are London-based clusters eligible to apply?

Applications are welcome from all regions.

Can one part of the UK partner with other parts of the UK, or will it be that we need to have a cluster where the lead HEI is based?

Clusters are by nature regional and are based on local partnerships. In this instance you will need to demonstrate what partnerships are already in place and why your approach is needed to address the challenges you have identified.

A reminder that all proposals should be aligned to the [Creative Industries Sector Plan](#).

Local Authority

Can a local authority lead a cluster?

A cluster needs to be hosted by a HEI working in partnership with at least one other HEI or an independent research organisation. Local authorities can participate as a partner, and we encourage their participation.

Will participation be limited to clusters from the Combined Authority areas, or can others take part as well?

Participation will not be limited; clusters can define their own geography.

Is it true funding can only be disbursed via devolved local governments, so only projects within areas that have a devolved local government will be eligible?
No, that is not true.

How will you ensure that your funding decisions are balanced in light of other investments—particularly for Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs), which are set to receive substantial additional support for their creative industries—compared to regions outside of MSAs? Additionally, how will you mitigate the risk of potential double funding within MSAs?

This issue can be viewed in two ways: as a risk of double funding, or as an opportunity to maximise impact through strategic investment. Striking the right balance will be essential, and we expect to see strong coordination within regions to ensure alignment across funding streams.

The AHRC is not operating in isolation. We are actively involved in the [Local Innovation Partnership Funding](#) and maintain regular engagement with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on initiatives related to creative places. We are connected with other delivery partners managing complementary

funding programmes, which helps us ensure coherence, avoid duplication, and support investment across both MSAs and non-MSA regions.

Will you be looking for match funding from these MSAs using their allocation?
AHRC expects to see funding awarded to creative industry partners balanced against an appropriate co-investment from that partner (financial or otherwise) to demonstrate commitment to the project.

Fund Opportunity and Assessment

Timelines

Do you have a sense of timescale for future Creative Cluster calls?

The current plan is to launch calls in January 2026, January 2027, and January 2028. Note that this is subject to change.

When do you expect to publish the full call criteria for this first wave?

The criteria for the outline stage call will launch on the 5th of January 2026. The full call will launch at the end of May 2026, and will be by invitation only. If you are successful getting through the assessment of the outline stage, you will be invited to put in a full application.

Why stagger the waves of cluster funding rather than run a larger cohort at the same time (as with the [Creative Industries Clusters 2018-23](#))?

The decision to stagger funding waves reflects both budget management and practical delivery considerations for AHRC. While four clusters are planned for this wave, there is flexibility depending on co-funding opportunities and internal capacity. Unlike the first cohort of clusters in 2018, this is now business as usual, with each cluster treated as a standalone programme to ensure sustained impact and avoid a single endpoint for all activity.

If we are able to secure co-funding from either other UKRI councils or other external partners, then we might be able to support more clusters in this wave.

HEI participation

Is there a minimum number of HEIs that needs to be included in a bid?

A cluster must be hosted by an HEI working in partnership with at least one other HEI, or independent research organisation or big industry partner.

When thinking about the number of HEI partners you should consider both the challenge of working collaboratively across multiple HEIs and the resource allocation necessary for multiple university overheads.

Is there any expectation around lead institution for the clusters bid (e.g. research intensive, generalist, creative industry specialist HEI)?

No, there is no specific expectation regarding the type of higher education institution (HEI) leading the bid. We welcome applications from all types of HEIs, whether research-intensive, specialist, or generalist.

You indicated in the presentation about capacity to manage the grant. What type of experience are you looking for applications to demonstrate?

The type of experience we're looking for depends on the specific challenges and needs within your region and sub-sector. You should demonstrate relevant expertise and capacity to address those issues effectively through the cluster.

Will HEIs be limited in how many applications can be made from each institution?

AHRC is unlikely to impose a rule on the number of applications an HEI may be a partner on. However, we would encourage you to think about why you would want to apply for two, and whether you have the resources and capacity to support multiple proposals.

Is there a limit on the size of organisation that HEIs can partner with?

There is no limit on the number or size of organisations HEIs can partner with. However, we would highlight the challenges of working with a large number of partners because of the capacity required to manage many relationships.

Funding and Co-investment

How much funding will you allocate per award?

The total AHRC grant you can apply for is £6.75 million.

Can you advise how much detail we will need to go into on the budget at the outline stage?

At the outline stage, we expect you to demonstrate the anticipated co-investment from your partners, networks, and wider ecosystem.

Can co-investment be cash and in-kind?

Yes, co-investment can be cash and in-kind.

When will co-investment need to be made? Can it be made over the lifetime of the contract?

Co-investment refers to any funding secured as part of your application. Leverage is any funding attracted to the cluster throughout the award, which can reasonably be attributed to AHRC's original funding.



You will be required to have achieved at least 30% towards the overall 50% target for leverage funding by the mid-term of your grant.

Applying and Assessment

To support our planning, could you share what will be required at the outline stage? Any templates or guidance notes from previous calls?

All the information that is currently available is within the presentation given at the [webinar](#).

Will you be running 'Resilience Checks' on applications?

We do not use the term resilience checks but we will undertake due diligence to assess your capacity as a team to deliver at each stage of the assessment process.

Will you be looking for enterprise development/commercialisation around what is created and the outcomes, built into legacy and sustainability design?

Yes, that is what clusters are about and refers to the new products, services and/or experiences that you will be supporting to develop. This then contributes to the economic growth generated by the cluster.

Is interview stage guaranteed?

No it isn't guaranteed. Only successful applications from the full stage will be invited to interview. We do not know at this point how many we will take through.

What is the situation with international partners/collaborators?

International partners/collaborators are welcomed and accepted within bids. There will be more information within the call document.

Please could you explain a bit more what 'portfolio balancing' means?

Portfolio balancing is where we ensure that our grants awarded are well distributed. If several top applications come from one area or sub-sector, AHRC may adjust selections to maintain diversity and avoid over-concentration.

What is the resubmission policy if the bid is unsuccessful in this next round?

The resubmission policy is still being confirmed, but it's likely that resubmissions will be allowed if unsuccessful at the outline stage, but not at the full stage.

General information



There are existing clusters, but there is almost no detail about them available online.

The clusters are still in early stages and will be publishing more information soon.

Is there a platform where SMEs can connect to interested HEIs, to establish partnerships?

AHRC do not have a platform for establishing partnerships. It wouldn't be appropriate for us to be acting as a broker on behalf of some organisations and not others.

Please see AHRC's statement at the top of this document.

Where can I find out more information?

Further information can be found via the links at the end of the [webinar presentation](#).