



Future Observatory Prototype Grants

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INTRODUCTION

At a time when supply chains are under considerable pressure, and linked to fossil fuels or extractive processes, there is a need for innovation in low carbon alternatives. The Prototype Grants are awards of up to £70,000 given to UK architecture and design studios for prototype development and second-stage design research in more sustainable supply chains.

At Future Observatory, we recognise that some of the most urgent design innovation towards the green transition is happening in practice; and that this is where supply chain challenges first reveal themselves. That's why we believe funding support is needed for architecture and design studios, in order to scale new prototypes and innovate the networks and ecosystems that deliver them.

Future Observatory is the Design Museum's national hub for design research and the green transition. Established in partnership with the UKRI Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) we act as a catalyst by supporting design research that can have real impact.

The next decade is no ordinary decade. The climate crisis demands rapid change, and design is critical to that challenge. Future Observatory's mission is to support design researchers in addressing the material, systemic and behavioural changes required by the green transition.

Today, direct funding opportunities for architecture and design practices are scarce; while at the same time, there is an abundance of new approaches ready for next stage research and development. Future Observatory aims to bridge this gap, with four agile awards for second-stage design research projects.

We are looking to hear from practitioners ready to break away from business-as-usual models and materials, and work collaboratively towards green transition solutions at supply chain scale: whether sourcing new materials, manufacturers and suppliers; testing new processes; streamlining distribution and transport; or proposing systemic redesign.

We can't wait to hear your proposals.

1. OPPORTUNITY

Four grants of up to £70,000 awarded to UK architecture and design practices for prototype development and second-stage design research in sustainable supply chains.

Awarded to small-to-medium sized practices and open to all architecture and design disciplines, including fashion, product design, material research, systems thinking and interdisciplinary practices.

Proposals should focus on sustainable supply chains, with a particular interest in bioregional, biomaterial and regenerative approaches.

Relevant research topics and projects may engage with a range of related themes, including but not limited to: retrofit, regenerative materials and systems, circular design, waste reduction and reuse, low carbon housing, agricultural byproducts or data-led tools and approaches.

2. AIMS AND SCOPE

AIMS

The Prototype Grants aim to:

- Encourage the next-stage development of projects, products or prototypes that are low carbon, bio-based and/or regenerative.
- Explore, support or redesign emerging supply chains that support these low carbon, bio-based and/or regenerative projects.
- Support existing UK-based small- to mid-size architecture and design studios to develop ideas that can have impact.
- Address a need for agile green transition funding in design research, where funding is scarce and action must be taken quickly in order to meet green transition demand and deadlines.

SCOPE

Projects can be in a single design discipline, interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary. The disciplinary focus of the project must fall within AHRC's discipline subject remit – specifically design.

Design disciplines include, but are 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.

Partnerships and collaboration are supported. Applications should articulate how collaborative activity will be conducted, considering good practice in equitable partnerships. Further guidance is available in the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) good research resource hub.

Second stage development is defined as the next step following a successful initial design or research project that your practice has recognised as successful (financially, technically or otherwise) in and of itself.

An industry collaborator or, at a minimum, an industry advisor, must form part of your application and vouch for the quality and viability of the project and the suitability for further funding.

3. WHO CAN APPLY?

All UK-based, small to mid-scale design studios and practices may apply for this grant of up to £70,000.

We use the UK government's small to medium scale enterprise definition: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/procurement-act-2023-short-guides/supplementary-information-small-and-medium-sized-enterprises-definition-html>

Studios and practices must have been operating for at least one year and have a portfolio of at least three previous completed projects

We will fund projects across a broad range of design disciplines, including 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.

Examples of what we are looking to fund:

- Building prototypes and manufacturing techniques for low carbon housing.
- New material supply chains in fashion and textiles.
- Systems design for circular waste and recycling networks.
- Communications design for green transition behaviour change, specifically for manufacturers and suppliers.
- Community toolkits for retrofit, repair and reuse.
- Bioregional and regenerative approaches to existing supply chains and products.

Small enterprises will be awarded £70,000 and medium enterprises will be funded £60,000.

We require awardees to contribute a percentage of co-funding to bring the Full Economic Cost (FEC) of the grant to £100,000.

- Small enterprises must contribute £30,000 or equivalent in-kind services.
- Medium enterprises must contribute £40,000 or equivalent in-kind services.

Co-funding can be financial contributions or in-kind costs (such as salaries, overheads, etc) or a combination of both. The co-funding can be provided by/ supplemented by an industry partner or collaborator.

We cannot fund:

- Novel or new research projects, or discovery research; we are looking to award agile funding for second stage research for existing projects.
- Desk-based research or primary research. We will not fund first-stage field research such as consumer interviews and surveys, but we may fund relevant research focus groups and workshops as part of advancement of

existing research outputs toward real world applications.

- The filling of intellectual property (for example, patent, trademark, registered design).
- Applications from individuals, self-employed freelancers or consultants.
- Applications from academic/higher education institutions (HEIs) or Independent Research Organisations (IROs).
- Multiple applications from the same studio – only one application per studio or practice is permitted.
- Applications which have already been submitted and rejected by UKRI, AHRC or Innovate UK; there must be significant development and substantial change made to an unsuccessful application.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion:

The Design Museum and Future Observatory museum pro-actively seeks to collaborate with institutional partners, individuals, and networks to realise its commitment to build a culturally diverse workforce. We positively encourage applications from underrepresented groups and consider candidates who are suitably qualified and eligible regardless of sex, race, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, religion or belief, marital status, or pregnancy and maternity.

To find out more, please visit <https://designmuseum.org/about-the-museum/a-commitment-to-equality-diversity-and-inclusion>

4. WHAT WE'RE LOOKING FOR

Successful projects will be awarded based on the strength and quality of the project proposal and the capability of the delivery team.

A strong project proposal will consider the deliverables and impact of the project as well as its ability to meet green transition challenges. It will show proof of quality of the existing research/projects and the viability of second stage or scale up. Finally, it's subject and aims will be relevant to the opportunity description, aims and scope.

A capable team will demonstrate a range of skills and expertise in their field as well as previous experience and capacity for scaling their existing research.

In addition, studios must apply with an industry collaborator or, at a minimum, an industry advisor. We do not require this industry applicant to co- or match- fund, but we are looking for collaborations which will increase the potential for impact.

Industry collaborators cannot benefit from the £60,000-£70,000 funding.

5. APPLICATION PROCESS

Two-part process

Stage 1: Expression of Interest

Stage 2: Mentor-pairing and second applications for shortlisted candidates

Jury panel and award

EXPRESSION OF INTEREST STAGE

Applications open on Wednesday 6 May 2026 at 10am. The deadline for submission is Friday 12 June 2026 at 4pm.

EOI form to be completed online

The EOI form includes five brief questions and includes the opportunity to submit up to three images, audio or video files.

Proposal summary (300 words)

Desired impact (150 words)

Project history and partners (300 words)

Team and practice/studio background (150 words)

Deliverables and timeline (100 words)

The expression of interest form is designed to be light-touch (1000 words) and acknowledges current capacity concerns and funding scarcity across industry.

The EOI may include website/online links, however your application must not include links to:

- Private/password-protected drive files
- Downloadable files content
- Larger word documents which expand the word limit of your application
- Files/folders with images/video file folders

Future Observatory will run two online webinars open to all interested parties. These webinars will be recorded and available online. We will also publish a Frequently Asked Questions document online.

Future Observatory will not be able to schedule individual application workshops or advisory phone calls with individual practices, but we will endeavour to reply to email questions, providing they are submitted in a timely manner before the deadline dates.

Please email grants_fututeobservatory@designmuseum.org

SHORTLISTING AND MENTOR-PARTNERING FOR SECOND STAGE APPLICATIONS

Shortlisted candidates will be selected by 26 June 2026 and paired with a mentor from a relevant design research and discipline background.

Studios will be given two months to complete a second application form, following advice and workshopping with their mentor.

The full application will include:

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

Successful studios will be given an honorarium of £3000 to complete the second stage application.

The second stage application and mentor pairing has been added to the Prototype Grant application process to acknowledge the time-consuming nature of funding proposals. An honorarium is offered to off-set resources needed to gather information and write proposals. We also hope that mentors can help to upskill R&D teams within small to mid-scale practices to apply for similar government funded grants (AHRC, DCMS, Innovate UK, etc).

We anticipate studios will meet with Future Observatory once and with their mentor at least twice before second-stage submission and spend 5-10 working days total on the application over a two-month period.

The deadline for second applications will be 28 August 2026 at 4pm.

JURY AND AWARD

Four project proposals will be selected by a jury panel of industry and design experts, chaired by Justin McGuirk (Director of Future Observatory at the Design Museum).

The jury panellists will be selected post-shortlisting, so that expertise according to short-listed proposal disciplines and proposal topics will be fairly represented and distributed across the panel.

Successful candidates will be informed by 18 September and projects must begin by 1 November 2026.

Successful studios will be awarded up to £70,000 in a series of quarterly payments.

6. ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

Applications at all stages will be scored according to the following criteria:

Quality and relevance of research proposal (30%)

Capacity of team deliver (30%)

Potential impact and outcomes (30%)

Value for money (10%)

Future Observatory will use [the UKRI definition of good research practice](#) to assess the quality of the research proposal.

Future Observatory will be informed by [the UKRI funding assessment and decision-making policy and principles](#).

Future Observatory will follow the Design Museum equality, diversity and inclusion principles when shortlisting candidates.

7. DURATION

The duration of these awards will be nine months.

Projects must start by 1 November 2026 and end by 31 July 2026.

Awardees will meet bi-monthly with the Future Observatory team and will report quarterly on financial spend, deliverables achieved and measures of success.

8. FUNDING AVAILABLE

Future Observatory will award 4x studios up to £70,000.

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

The full economic cost (FEC) of your project must equal £100,000 or more; meaning awardees must co-fund

- £30,000 or equivalent in-kind costs if you are a small enterprise
- £40,000 or equivalent in-kind costs if you are a medium enterprise

The £100,000 cannot supplement an existing grant proposal/a body of research currently underway or act as continuation funding/extension of deadline.

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.

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

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.

9. ADDITIONAL INFO

We will run 2x application webinars during the Expression of Interest Stage:

- Wednesday 20 May 2026 12 midday
- Tuesday 2 June 2026 12 midday

Please visit our Frequently Asked Questions document after the first webinar.

Future Observatory will not be able to schedule individual application workshops or advisory phone calls with individual practices, but we will endeavour to reply to email questions, providing they are submitted in a timely manner before the deadline dates.