

COVID-19

NI START-UPS AND SCALE-UPS



Updated: 29 March 2020

POTENTIAL SUPPORT AVENUES

PURPOSE

In the weeks and months ahead, many of Northern Ireland's Start Up and Scale Up companies will need monetary support to survive and move forward, post this unprecedented Coronavirus pandemic.

This document has been prepared by Catalyst to assist in clarifying the potential forms of financial support, specifically for NI Start-Up and Scale-Up companies, during the Coronavirus outbreak.

CBILS

Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme

For companies with cashflow and probably profitability, the new British Business Bank Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CBILS) could be helpful. It will be run by the banks with a proportion of up to £5m loan 'guaranteed' by government. This scheme became operationally live on 23rd March. NI banks operating the scheme include Danske, Bank of Ireland and Ulster Bank.

It applies to companies who would have been considered 'viable' before the virus. The banks' actual interpretation of this phrase will be crucial.

There is 0% interest for 12 months and 80% of the loan is guaranteed by government via British Business Bank. There is an overall cap per lender which increases the risk for the banks, especially in this already very uncertain climate. However this cap is four times higher than on previous schemes on which CBILS is based.

Larger loans will require guarantees although personal homes cannot be used as collateral here. However, below £250k, it is possible to have loans without guarantees – although this is at the discretion of the lending banks. The big four banks in England have agreed not to take personal guarantees below £250k, however they do not operate in NI. We await a response on this from the NI banks.

The support scheme can be applied to term loans, overdrafts, asset finance and invoice finance. The original rules about de minimis aid have been dropped.

Companies will have to provide projections etc and there is likely to be a bottleneck in processing these – especially as some bank staff are/will be off work. In addition, NI bank staff have no experience in operating the previous EFG Scheme. Companies working with banks without significant staff in NI are experiencing long delays in getting responses.

While in theory this scheme applies to start-ups, British Business Bank suggest that their Start Up Loans programme (loans up to £25k at 6%) may be better suited. Over £7m has been issued to NI businesses under this scheme.

See <https://www.startuploans.co.uk/free-start-up-guides>

HOW TO APPLY

Check up on the list of participating banks at <https://www.british-business-bank.co.uk/ourpartners/coronavirus-business-interruption-loan-scheme-cbils/accredited-lenders>

Approach you own bank first, ideally via their website. After that consider using other banks.

CATALYST SUMMARY

CBILS will work for a limited number of Start Up and Scale Up companies who are sufficiently developed to have been 'viable' for a loan before the outbreak. In practice we fear that obtaining loans, even under this scheme, may prove very difficult in the current risk environment. In our opinion, in 99% of cases for loss making companies (before Coronavirus) it will not be possible to access this scheme.

BUSINESS SUPPORT GRANT

The UK announcement of £10/£25k grants has now been translated into NI. The £25k grant will only be for companies in the hospitality, tourism and retail sectors. This rules out most Start Up and Scale Up companies.

While it might appear that the £10k grant would be helpful for Start Up and Scale Up companies, in practice this will be very limited. The use of eligibility for the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme as a filter means that in practice that it will only apply to very small companies. To illustrate this the NAV for an Innovation Centre unit at Catalyst is above £15k and so such tenants here will not be eligible.

Some small companies will pay their rates directly and so will have the necessary rates identifications to apply for this grant. However many will be in subdivided or shared workspaces and may find it impossible to obtain these. To be clear, the landlord is not eligible for this grant and so cannot claim on behalf of tenant companies.

HOW TO APPLY

A simple on line form is now available to claim these grants on :

<https://www.covid-19smallbusinessgrants.economy-ni.gov.uk/>

CATALYST SUMMARY

The £10k grants may be helpful but only to the smallest Start Up and Scale Up companies.

CJRS

CORONAVIRUS JOB RETENTION SCHEME

This is a bold scheme to provide up to 80% of the costs of workers not working - referred to as 'furloughed'. The details have now been announced and they make it clear the furloughed employees can not provide services or help generate earnings for their employer. So, while this would make a huge difference to many tech companies, they cannot continue development or coding at home using furloughed workers.

A further addition means that the government will now cover the employer national insurance and minimum auto-enrolment pension scheme contributions employers pay on the wages they must pay their furloughed staff - on top of the wages covered under the scheme.

There is already significant evidence that the entire funding pathways for new and growing Start Up and Scale Up companies are going to be disrupted for at least 6-12 months. Institutional investors are concentrating on their portfolio investments and ear-marking funds for additional extra funding rounds.

Anecdotally, angel funders are cutting back even more. They too expect to have to do extra funding rounds for their portfolios and in addition their source of funds is their personal savings whose value has plummeted.

Some funders still claim to be looking at new deals. A helpful list of many of those who do is at : <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Z3cGCZuDRrHznW4AvC41CnirNd5PDSBEQ0gVm4Zt5PO/edit#gid=1721480720>

Pre-revenue companies who are still developing their tech will need to be very careful not to fall foul of these rules once announced. This will be despite their natural desire to use this opportunity to continue their vital development work.

HOW TO APPLY

HMRC states that employers need to designate affected employees as 'furloughed workers' and notify them of this change and then submit information to HMRC about the employees that have been furloughed and their earnings through a new online portal which has yet to be set up.

CATALYST SUMMARY

This scheme will be massive in helping Start Up and Scale Up companies survive. However, care will be needed to ensure compliance with the rules for furloughing once available.

R&D TAX CREDITS

This one existing area of support might in fact provide a quick route to increased liquidity. R&D tax credits can be claimed much more widely than the name suggest, so many potentially eligible companies are not aware they can claim.

To help the flow of cash, the intended cap on R&D tax credits has been deferred for a period and extra staff have been drafted in to process claims.

The hope is that claims can be processed in 4 weeks with cash available within 2 more.

R&D tax credit claims are based on a company's annual accounts which could mean that some companies find that the timing is poor for them. A suggestion could be to change your financial year i.e. close your accounts early if this would allow you to put in an early R&D tax credit claim.

Recently new entrant providers have the ability to implement claims with a semi-automated process quickly and with much reduced cost. Some also couple this with a finance option which allows almost instant access to the cash for a small percentage of the claim.

HOW TO APPLY

The basic details of the scheme are on:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/corporation-tax-research-and-development-rd-relief>

A quick search will reveal a large number of specialist provider companies who can help with this process. In order to gain access to cash more quickly, companies may wish to check which providers also include a financing or advance service alongside the application process.

CATALYST SUMMARY

Many Start Up and Scale Up companies may not be aware of R&D tax credits, the speed with which they might be applied for and that some providers can give the cash almost upfront. For these companies, this scheme should be examined urgently.

Coronavirus Self Employed Income Support Scheme

This scheme allows self-employed individuals or members of partnerships to claim a taxable grant worth 80% of trading profits up to a maximum of £2,500 per month for the next three months.

It is important to note that it works on profit as filled in Income Tax Self Assessment returns over the last 1-3 years. This profit must be less than £50,000 and must constitute at least half of your income.

The support is 80% of this figure, capped at £2,500 per month. Unlike the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, it is possible to continue work while receiving this support.

In order to qualify, you must have submitted in Income Tax Self Assessment tax return for the tax year 2018-19.

While in itself a massive support scheme, SEISS will apply to few Start Up Scale Up companies.

HOW TO APPLY

There is no need to apply. HMRC will contact those eligible and invite them to apply on line. You should not try to contact HMRC directly about this.

CATALYST SUMMARY

This will be an excellent support to the relatively few Start Up Scale Up companies where it might apply.

GENERAL FUNDING OPTIONS

There are a number of measures which will help cash-flow. These include VAT deferment of 3 months and in some cases rates relief.

Companies who pay rates directly will not need to take any action. However, those renting from landlords should ensure that their landlord passes on the deferment and in a timely fashion. In both cases the effect should be a 25% reduction in the annual rates paid.

CATALYST SUPPORT

As well as updating this document, Catalyst is very actively feeding into government both locally and nationally. It is facilitating the Start Up and Scale Up community to support itself as well as organising virtual support.

Catalyst on line support is proving very popular, supported as it is by our community of experienced partners. This expertise is available to all companies and not just those in Catalyst.

CONTACT US

If you are a Northern Ireland Start Up and Scale Up company and want to discuss anything in this document, please contact us:

✉ community@wearecatalyst.org

🌐 Visit www.wearecatalyst.org for further support