

Guidance

Future Live Fan Experiences Research and Development (R&D) Challenge

Quick Read

Purpose

To accelerate innovation in the live events sector by inviting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and universities working with creative technology to prototype and test the next wave of live fan experiences.

Funding

- Up to £25,000 per project
- 2 x university-led projects (funded by XR Network+)
- 2 x SME-led projects (funded by MusicFutures).

Outputs

- Development of an innovative R&D prototype as the primary deliverable, and tested in a real-world or simulated context.
- Project documentation, visual assets, user engagement strategy and user data.

Project Partners

- **XR Network+ (XR Stories):** Advancing UK immersive R&D across industries.
- **MusicFutures:** Connecting music innovation, research, and industry in the Liverpool City Region.
- **Liverpool Experience Campus (Formerly ACC Liverpool):** Leading venue partner hosting world-class events.

To Apply

- For University-led projects, funded by XR Network+: <https://xrnetworkplus.xrstories.co.uk/grant/future-live-fan-experiences-rd-challenge/>
- For SME-led projects, funded by MusicFutures: www.musicfutures.uk

Funding call overview

The live events sector, including concerts, festivals, and major sporting events, is undergoing rapid transformation driven by advances in **immersive technology, artificial intelligence (AI), and next-generation connectivity**. Audiences, particularly Gen Z and Gen Alpha, increasingly expect experiences that are highly interactive, participatory, and personalised.

The Future Fan Experiences R&D Challenge is led by [XR Network+](#) (EPSRC-funded) and [MusicFutures](#) (AHRC-funded), in partnership with Liverpool Experience Campus (formerly [ACC Liverpool](#)). The R&D Challenge, aims to support R&D activity. Funded projects will leverage infrastructure and facilities to develop prototypes that enhance **fan experiences** across live music, sport, and cultural events.

The successful model uses a strategic collaboration framework: **Creative/Venue Institution (Liverpool Experience Campus) × Research Centre or SME × Expert Intermediary (XR Network+/MusicFutures)**.

Areas of focus

We are interested in innovative solutions that demonstrate how emerging technologies can transform fan experiences. Example project areas include:

- **Immersive & extended reality (XR) experiences** enabled by high-capacity 5G.
- **AI & XR driven audience participation** (real-time feedback, adaptive content, personalised experiences).
- **Novel approaches to fan engagement and fan co-creation** before, during, and after events.
- **Operational innovation** (safety, inclusivity, customer experience) that enhances the overall event journey.
- **Scalable participatory technologies** that work across both medium venues and large-scale arenas.
- **Democratic and accessible workflows** that utilise markerless, low-cost systems or tools designed for non-programmers to ensure scalability and wider accessibility.
- Exploring the **end-to-end event journey** (pre-purchase, build up, in-show, post-show).
- Solutions for **distributed and hybrid** in-person and remote live experiences.
- Prototyping **multi-platform distribution models** (e.g., targeting younger audiences via gaming platforms).

The Opportunity

Successful applicants will receive:

1. **Financial resources:** Up to £25k per project to support R&D activity (for University-led projects funded by XR Network+ this will be £25k at 100% FEC, and funded at 80% of FEC; for SME-led projects funded by MusicFutures this will be £25k at 100% of project costs).
2. **Access to creative and technical support:** Through XR Network+ and MusicFutures' teams.

3. **Use of testbeds:** Real world venue testing opportunities, including cutting-edge **high-bandwidth 5G OpenRAN connectivity at Liverpool Experience Campus**.
4. **Collaborative environments:** Access to researchers, industry mentors, and event operators/promoters.
5. **Visibility:** Potential connections with global cultural events and industry leaders.
6. **Impact:** Opportunity to shape the future of live experiences and contribute to Liverpool's position as a global beacon for creative innovation.

Eligibility

The Challenge is open to **companies, creative industry innovators, researchers and research technicians, and technology developers**. Collaborations across industry and academia are encouraged.

University-led projects (XR Network+ funded)

- Project leads must be based at a UK research organisation [eligible for UK Research and Innovation \(UKRI\) funding](#).
- Eligible individuals must meet the normal definition of a 'Project Lead' used by UKRI. This can be summarised as an individual with a substantial affiliation (e.g. contract or honorary appointment with the organisation, emeritus status) with the lead organisation that is eligible for UKRI funding. This affiliation must be in place for the duration of the grant, and the Project Lead must be actively involved in the project's direction and work. Please see UKRI's [Roles in funding applications: eligibility, responsibilities and costings guidance](#) for further information.
- Projects must be costed on a **Full Economic Cost (FEC)** basis and will be funded at **80% FEC**. Project funding will be administered by the University of York through a subgrant agreement.
- Project costs must be in line with standard [UKRI terms and conditions of FEC grants](#).
- XR Network+ funding **cannot be directly awarded** to any industry companies participating as project partners or any organisation not eligible for UKRI funding.

SME-led projects (MusicFutures funded)

- Project leads must be a UK registered company.
- In addition, SME project leads must be registered, or significantly based, in the **Liverpool City Region** and have a project idea focused on music fan experiences. Project funding will be administered by University of Liverpool through a subgrant agreement.
- SME Projects are funded at 100% of project costs, inclusive of VAT, including labour (staff), materials, subcontractors, equipment and other costs
 - Equipment costs — maximum of 20% of project grant for equipment and capital purchase costs.
 - Subcontracting— up to 70% maximum subcontracting costs, with a maximum 30% outside of Liverpool City Region
 - We are keen to see projects that demonstrate additional co-investment/in kind contributions at application stage. Ideally 1:1.
- Projects must comply with Minimal Financial Assistance subsidy controls, meaning that your organisation must fall within the £315K limit over 3 years, please refer to [Subsidy Control Act 2022](#) for more information.

- Projects should demonstrate social value across environmental sustainability and inclusivity.

All projects (Academic and SME)

- Applicants must demonstrate the capacity to deliver R&D projects that can be prototyped and tested within the programme timeframe.
- All project costings must be signed off by an appropriate line manager or academic supervisor.
- Standard ethical procedures and approvals at the applicant's institution must be followed.

Activities ineligible for funding

- Procurement of new equipment (except for items essential to the delivery of the proposed project)
- Production expenses unrelated to R&D.
- Projects primarily aimed at university teaching or curriculum development.

Timeline

- Call Opens: 13 April 2026
- Deadline for Applications: 29 May 2026 (1.00pm GMT)
- Selected Applicants Notified: July 2026
- Project Start Date: 1st October 2026
- Project End Date: 31st March 2027 (duration 6 months)

How to apply

Applicants must complete and submit the application form and supporting documents by 1.00pm GMT on 29th May 2026.

Required submission documents include:

1. Application form
2. Additional supporting information/links

Links to all resources and the submission portal can also be found on the [Current open calls page of the XR Network+ website](#), and the [MusicFutures website](#).

Equitable opportunity and application support

XR Network+ and MusicFutures are committed to fostering innovation and enhancing research excellence inclusively and equitably.

We encourage applications from individuals of all backgrounds, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, disability, neurodivergence, religion, or socioeconomic status.

We also encourage applications from first-time grant applicants. If you require any adjustments to complete your application, or if you feel you would be disadvantaged by a written application (e.g., preference for video

submission), please contact the XR Network+ team at enquiries@xrstories.co.uk for Academic-led projects, and the MusicFutures team on musicfutures@liverpool.ac.uk for SME-led projects.

Selection process and criteria

Applications will be assessed against the following criteria, reviewed by an interdisciplinary panel of researchers and industry specialists. Funding recommendations will take into account project feasibility and consideration of diversity and inclusion, adopting a portfolio approach across the challenge themes.

- **Innovation and relevance:** How innovative is the proposed project in application of extended reality (XR) technologies, and how relevant is it to the 'Future Live Fan Experiences' themes?
- **Quality of collaboration:** How constructive are the collaborations between proposed project partners (e.g. academic, industry, venue), and how do they enhance the project delivery?
- **Impact:** How will the project contribute to skills development and knowledge transfer within the R&D community locally or nationally?
- **Feasibility and delivery plan:** Is the timeline, budget, and proposed technical execution realistic for the six-month window?
- **Diversity and inclusion:** How does the application demonstrate that inclusive and accessible approaches have been considered throughout various stages of the project?
- **Sustainability:** How does the project demonstrate responsible and sustainable practices? Are there measures in place to minimise environmental impact?

Funding conditions

Recipients will be required to:

- Attend **monthly online progress meetings** with an XR Network+/MusicFutures team member.
- For XR Network+ funded projects, provide an expenditure statement and invoice quarterly in arrears based on actual expenditure.
- For SME / MusicFutures funded projects the project will be funded at 60% at project commencement, 30% at the midway review point, and 10% on project completion.
- Commit to providing documentation of their project prototype on completion and participate in dissemination.
- Acknowledge **XR Network+, MusicFutures, and Liverpool Experience Campus** on any eventual outputs (guidance will be provided on this to successful applicants).

Expected outputs

- The development and testing of a **technical prototype**.
- Documentation and visual assets to clearly articulate the prototype's purpose, user engagement strategy, and expected impacts.
- Internal mid-project and end-of-project reports.
- Contribution to at least one XR Network+ or MusicFutures event.

Intellectual Property (IP) considerations

We require projects to clearly articulate their IP strategy early in the R&D process, noting the complexity inherent in collaborations involving university and industry partners. The IP created will generally be owned by the project team. However, the Guidance recommends establishing a pathway whereby the Challenge Partner (Liverpool Experience Campus) is granted a structured negotiation period to explore the integration and exploitation of resulting innovations into their activities, ensuring maximum public benefit and commercialisation opportunity. Projects should prioritise the development of **open-source standards and protocols** where appropriate to facilitate wider adoption by SMEs.

Partners

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- **MusicFutures:** Connecting music innovation, research, and industry in the Liverpool City Region.
- **Liverpool Experience Campus:** Leading venue partner hosting world-class events.

About Liverpool Experience Campus

Liverpool Experience Campus is part of The ACC Liverpool Group, an events and experience campus that includes multiple destinations: including the 10,000 capacity M&S Bank Arena and the 5000 capacity Exhibition Centre Liverpool, positioned on Liverpool's heritage waterfront.

Questions?

If you have any questions about this opportunity, please contact:

The XR Network+ team at enquiries@xrstories.co.uk for queries about academic-led projects.

The MusicFutures team at musicfutures@liverpool.ac.uk for SME-led projects.