

2026 Application Evaluation Guide

This guide explains how your application will be reviewed. It is meant to help you prepare clear, complete materials without disclosing internal scoring weights or formulas.

What reviewers are looking for

Reviewers use the application, your uploaded files, and the PIC R&D white paper (when applicable) to assess the strength of your proposal. They score each criterion, leave comments, and pick an overall recommendation. Reviewer scores and comments are advisory inputs for later decision-making; final funding decisions remain subject to the appropriate PIC decision process.

How scoring works

Each reviewer rates every criterion on the same five-level (0-4) scale and writes a short comment explaining the score. They also choose an overall recommendation: **Fund**, **Fund with conditions**, **Hold / revise**, or **Decline**. Multiple reviewers score each application and their scores roll up into an advisory summary used to inform the PIC decision process.

- 0 Does not meet
- 1 Partially meets
- 2 Mostly meets
- 3 Fully meets
- 4 Exceeds / exceptional evidence

You will **not** see your numeric scores. Reviewers and the PIC decision body see scores and comments; applicants are informed of the funding decision and, when appropriate, a summary of feedback.

Review Areas

The rubric covers three gates and thirteen criteria. The gates and criteria are the same for all tracks; only the supporting materials differ.

Gate 1 — Concept, Market, and Strategic Fit

How clearly the project fits a real customer, market, ecosystem, and regional polymer opportunity.

Market Potential

Name a customer. The applications that score well here point to someone specific who would pay for this: what they spend today, what your work changes, and whatever proof you have that the interest is real, whether that is a pilot conversation, a letter of interest, or a purchase order. A large market-size number does not substitute for one named customer.

Where to address this: Commercial Opportunity and market sections of the application; expand with adoption evidence in your PIC R&D white paper if applicable.

Strategic Alignment

Show that the work matches the funder's stated priorities: Synthe6, PIC R&D, Tech Hub goals, and the broader Northeast Ohio polymer cluster. Reviewers compare what you are proposing against those program intents, not against the abstract idea of good polymer work. If your project sits across multiple programs, say so explicitly.

Where to address this: Project Summary, Track selection, and Strategic Fit prompts on the application form.

Ecosystem Contribution

The strongest projects strengthen the regional polymer network rather than operate in isolation. Cite specific assets you will use (Bounce Innovation Hub, university labs, regional manufacturing partners), the partners or collaborators you have already engaged, and the network value your work creates beyond your own organization.

Where to address this: Facility Synergy, Value Chain Position, and Partnerships fields on the application form.

Sustainability & Impact

This covers circularity, resilience, environmental benefit, and broader polymer-industry growth impact. Reviewers do not expect every project to be about recycling; they want to see that you have thought about your project's effects (material lifecycle, energy intensity, downstream economic activity, jobs, workforce) and named them concretely.

Where to address this: Sustainability fields, Jobs / Impact Summary, and Polymer Relevance on the application form.

Clarity

This one is about your writing, not your project. A reviewer cannot score what they cannot follow. Define your acronyms on first use, answer the whole prompt instead of half of it, and keep the basic facts easy to find. Brevity helps. Vagueness hurts.

Where to address this: All long-form fields. Re-read every response and ask whether a reviewer outside your subfield could understand it without background context.

Gate 2 — Project Execution

Whether the project appears technically credible, feasible, partnered well, and ready for the requested support.

Technical Merit & Readiness

Reviewers assess whether the technical approach is sound and whether your stated readiness level (TRL/MRL) is supported by evidence rather than asserted. Strong responses cite specific validation work already done (lab data, pilot runs, customer trials, peer-reviewed publications), reference relevant prior art, and are honest about what has not been validated yet.

Where to address this: Technical Approach, Current/Target TRL+MRL fields, and uploaded technical materials. For PIC R&D applicants, this is the dimension your white paper carries the most weight on.

Implementation Plan

A budget that does not reconcile to the milestones is the fastest way to lose points here. This dimension is about the mechanics of doing the work: milestones that are specific and dated, a timeline that is realistic for the team and its dependencies, and execution risks named honestly rather than left out. Show that you have thought through how the project actually runs, not just what it would produce.

Where to address this: Requested Funding, milestone narrative on the application form, project plan in the PIC R&D white paper.

Synergy & Partnerships

The PIC ecosystem rewards real collaboration over general references to partners. Reviewers look at the quality of the relationships you cite: whether each partner has a defined role, a stake in the outcome, and a track record relevant to the work. Strong responses name each partner contribution and point to evidence such as a letter, MOU, committed staff time, facility access, or prior collaboration.

Where to address this: Partnerships field on the application form; partner letters or MOUs as uploaded attachments.

Funding Leverage

This captures cost-share, other committed funding, and credible follow-on financing paths. Reviewers do not expect every project to match dollar-for-dollar, but they do want to understand the broader funding picture: what else is committed, what you are pursuing in parallel, and how the requested PIC support unlocks or de-risks larger investment downstream.

Where to address this: Match Amount and Requested Funding fields, plus a brief note on other committed or pending funding sources.

Intellectual Property (IP)

You do not need patents to score well. Reviewers want evidence that you have thought about your IP position: what is protectable, what is already public, whether you have checked freedom-to-operate where it matters, and how ownership would work in a collaboration. Where IP matters to the project, address it briefly and clearly; where it does not, say so.

Where to address this: IP-related prompts on the application form; deeper treatment in the PIC R&D white paper if relevant.

Gate 3 — Team Strength

Whether the applicant team has the leadership, technical depth, and business judgment to execute the work.

Leadership Capability

A founder listed at 0.05 FTE running a complex pilot raises an immediate question: who is actually doing this work? Time commitment is the first thing a reviewer checks, then whether the lead has run something like this before. Name the lead, say how much of their time the project gets, and give a sentence or two on why they are the right person to run it.

Where to address this: Primary Contact and team description fields; founder/leader bios in uploaded materials.

Technical Expertise

This is about the team, not the lead alone. The people doing the technical work need relevant depth in whatever the project requires, whether that is materials science, polymer processing, pilot operations, or characterization. Name your key technical contributors and what each brings; if you have gaps, name those too and how you would close them.

Where to address this: Team description on the application form; CVs or bios in uploaded materials.

Business Acumen

Reviewers assess commercial judgment: do you understand your customers, your unit economics, your competitors, and the path from this work to a viable business? Early-stage applicants are not expected to have all the answers, but should show they are asking the right questions and have evidence of customer conversations, market research, or commercial advisors.

Where to address this: Commercial Opportunity narrative and any commercial/advisory team detail in uploaded materials.

Track-specific guidance

Synthe6

Early-stage materials startups. The shared application form covers most of what reviewers need. You can attach supporting materials but a white paper is not required.

PIC R&D

Industry- or university-led applied R&D. The shared application form covers framing; your white paper is where Technical Merit & Readiness, Implementation Plan, and IP earn their evidence.

Both

Submit the form and the white paper. Make sure the two are consistent — reviewers cross-check.

How to use this guide

Use this guide as a checklist before submitting. Keep responses specific, evidence-based, and non-confidential. If a question does not apply to your project, say so briefly rather than leaving it blank. Strong applications explain the problem, proposed solution, requested support, existing evidence, and what success would look like after the support period.

Applicant-facing guide for the 2026 PIC innovation intake. Internal reviewer weights, formulas, and final decision thresholds are intentionally not included. Questions about the application or this guide can be directed to the PIC team.