THE CAMBRIDGE CLIMATE CHALLENGE 2026

Full brief

The Cambridge Climate Challenge empowers innovators to make a real difference. We aim to advance climate innovation by supporting University of Cambridge postgraduate students and postdoctoral researchers to take their first steps into entrepreneurship, and by helping early-stage ventures progress toward real-world impact.

This competition is delivered by Cambridge Zero in partnership with Carbon13, Cambridge Enterprise, the Maxwell Centre, the Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership Canopy, King's Entrepreneurship Lab, and Energy IRC, with sponsorship from Carbon13.

What is the competition about?

The Cambridge Climate Challenge invites teams to develop bold, innovative solutions that accelerate decarbonisation and the pressing challenges of climate and nature.

We invite small, interdisciplinary teams of postgraduate students and postdoctoral researchers to submit early-stage proposals for scalable ideas that accelerate decarbonisation and tackle climate challenges. Your ideas can explore economic, societal, and behavioural shifts, as well as scientific, digital, or engineering breakthroughs. They might reduce energy consumption, cut greenhouse gas emissions, or advance nature-based strategies for mitigation and adaptation. Critically, we're looking for solutions that are intrinsically scalable with significant potential to grow in size, capacity, or scope.

To support ventures at different stages of development, we offer two tracks:

Track 1: Conceptual-stage ideas

For solutions in their earliest phases, where ideas are still being shaped. You might be exploring fundamental concepts, identifying problems, or developing initial approaches. Or you might simply have a strong interest in climate-related entrepreneurship that you want to pursue. Submissions could include novel insights, theoretical models, or potential applications, even if they haven't yet been tested or built into prototypes.

Track 2: Early-stage ventures

For ideas that have moved beyond the conceptual stage into proof-of-concept or validation. You may be refining designs, conducting preliminary experiments, gathering data to demonstrate feasibility, or building the evidence base for your innovation. The focus is on ideas that show promise for implementation, whether through scientific validation, technical demonstrations, pilots, or early-stage market assessments.

Who can take part?

The Cambridge Climate Challenge is open to teams comprised of:

- Master's students
- PhD students
- Postdoctoral researchers

At least 50% of your team must be current postgraduate students or postdoctoral researchers from the University of Cambridge. That means at least one person in a team of two, and at least two people in a team of three.

Other team members are welcome! They can be individuals not affiliated with the University of Cambridge and may live outside the UK. We encourage diverse perspectives and interdisciplinary collaboration. See our Terms and Conditions for full eligibility details.

We're looking for small (2–4 people) interdisciplinary teams of postgraduate students and postdoctoral researchers. You don't need to be a seasoned entrepreneur – this competition is for those taking their first steps into innovation and early-stage ventures just starting out.

You don't need to be a scientist or engineer to participate. We're also interested in ideas related to economic, societal, and behavioural change that could lead to reductions in energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions.

You don't need to have a team already established to express your interest in the competition. Between 29 January and 20 February, we will be holding a series of sessions to help foster collaborative teams and develop ideas. See details below of our networking, training, and support programme on offer.

How will the competition work?

Introductory stage

The Cambridge Climate Challenge launches on **Thursday 29 January 2026**. From this date, you and your potential team will have **four weeks to enter your concept** into the competition using the entry form.

But you won't be doing this alone! During these four weeks, we'll host a series of 3–4 interactive sessions designed to help you:

- connect with like-minded innovators
- shape and refine your ideas
- form strong, interdisciplinary teams (if you don't already have one)

These sessions are a fantastic opportunity to learn from past winners and alumni of the competition and to spark creativity through activities such as:

- a mini hackathon to kickstart innovation
- a skills-and-ideas speed dating session to match complementary expertise
- a thematic brainstorming workshop to explore big climate challenges

Once your team is ready, you will need to **submit an entry form** outlining your idea. Your submission should clearly describe your concept and its potential impact. The deadline for all entry forms is **11:59pm GMT on Sunday 22 February 2026**.

After submissions close, a shortlisting panel will review all entries and select teams to progress to the semi-final stage.

Semi-final stage

Successful teams progressing to the semi-final stage will be announced on **Friday 27 February 2026**. All shortlisted teams will be notified by email.

This stage is all about helping you and your team develop your climate solutions and strengthen your entrepreneurial skills. Throughout the semi-final period, we'll be hosting a series of workshops and events open to all participants. These sessions will cover technical insights, business fundamentals, and practical tools to help you refine your ideas and develop a strong semi-final submission.

These sessions are open to everyone, regardless of whether you've advanced to the semi-final stage.

The workshop schedule will be published on the [Climate Challenge webpage].

Before **11:59pm GMT on Monday 30 March 2026**, semi-finalists must submit:

- For Track 1 (concept-stage ideas):
  - A 2-minute video pitch
  - A 350-word supporting statement for the judging panel

- For Track 2 (early-stage ventures):
  - An early-stage business plan
  - A 2-minute video pitch

A shortlisting panel will review semi-final submissions and select the top teams to advance to the Final stage.

Final stage

Successful teams progressing to the final stage will be announced on **Friday 3 April 2026**. All shortlisted teams will be notified by email.

During this stage, each finalist team will be paired with a mentor and invited to join a series of workshops to strengthen your storytelling and sharpen your pitching skills, giving you the preparation to confidently present your ideas and ventures to investors and decision-makers.

All workshop sessions are open to everyone, regardless of whether you've advanced to the final stage.

The competition will conclude with our Grand Final Showcase on **Friday 1 May 2026 at King's College, Cambridge**. This is your moment to bring everything you've learned to life!

Finalists will be invited to take to the stage and pitch their solution to a panel of expert judges and a small live audience for a chance to win the prizes on offer.

Each team will have up to three minutes to present their pitch, followed by ten minutes of Q&A with the judges. This format applies to both Track 1 and Track 2 finalist teams, giving everyone an equal opportunity to share their vision and answer questions.

Winners will be announced and prizes awarded during the event.

After the pitches, we hope you will join us for a celebration and connect with experts in climate innovation, entrepreneurship, and policy, as well as senior academics and investors. This is your chance to build valuable relationships and take your ideas to the next level.

All entrants to the competitions are welcome to attend the showcase event.

Key dates

Thursday 29 January 5pm–7pm	The Launch at Keynes Hall, King's College Introductory stage begins
Sunday 22 February 11:59pm	Deadline to submit entry form
Friday 27 February	Semi-finalists announced
Monday 30 March 11:59pm	Deadline for semi-finalists to submit materials for shortlisting: **Track 1:** 2-minute video pitch and 350-word supporting statement **Track 2:** early-stage business plan and 2-minute video pitch
Friday 3 April	Finalists announced
Friday 1 May 3pm–7:30pm	The Grand Final Showcase at Keynes Hall, King's College

All of our **workshop sessions are open to everyone**, no matter where you are in the competition. Whether you've advanced to the final stage or not, you're invited to join, learn, and grow alongside the community. We'd love to see you there!

Prizes on offer

For Track 1 (conceptual-stage ideas):

- **Winner:** £1,500 cash prize
- **Runner-up:** £500 cash prize

For Track 2 (early-stage ventures):

- **Winner:** £5,000 cash prize to kickstart your venture, and a fast-track opportunity to apply for the Carbon13 venture builder programme
- **Runner-up:** £2,000 cash prize

During the Grand Final Showcase, standout teams may also receive special awards at the discretion of our judging panel and programme partners.

Beyond the prize

All winners and runners-up will be offered mentor connections with climate-focused entrepreneurs, researchers, investment managers, and policy experts to help you develop and shape your innovation.

Winners from both tracks will also be invited to speak at the Cambridge Zero Annual Research Symposium later in the year.

Benefits of being involved

- **Skill development:** Gain experience of developing a concept from idea to pitch. Enhance your entrepreneurial, technical, and collaborative skills through workshops and feedback sessions.

- **Visibility and networking:** Meet, network, and socialise with other people interested in climate innovation. Showcase your solution to potential investors, partners, and stakeholders within the Cambridge climate innovation ecosystem.

- **Funding opportunities:** Compete for seed funding and resources to accelerate the development and deployment of your solution.

Previous Climate Challenge projects

The Cambridge Climate Challenge (previously named Carbon Challenge) has taken different forms over time in terms of prize money, theme, etc.

Examples of previous projects:

- Climate Challenge 2025
- Climate Challenge 2024
- Climate Challenge 2023
- Climate Challenge 2022
- Carbon Challenge 2017

Cambridge Climate Challenge partners and sponsors

Cambridge Zero exists to maximise the University of Cambridge's contribution towards achieving a resilient and sustainable zero-carbon world. Cambridge Zero is not just about developing greener technologies or a zero-carbon University. They harness the full range and breadth of the Collegiate University's capabilities, both in the UK and globally, to develop solutions that work for our lives, our society, and our economy.

Carbon13, this year's sponsor, is a venture builder and accelerator investing in and supporting founders and companies who are actively contributing to reducing greenhouse gas emissions on a global scale. They support founders at all stages of start-up development, from the very beginning of ideas and co-founder teaming, through to pre-seed investment and scale. Carbon13 invests across the technology spectrum, including hardware, software, process systems, materials, deep tech, and business model innovations capable of driving real and rapid change on a global scale.

Cambridge Enterprise supports academics, researchers, staff, and students in achieving knowledge transfer and research impact. They help with using commercial avenues to develop ideas and expertise by offering expert advice and support in commercialisation and social enterprise.

Cambridge Enterprise Ventures is the venture capital arm of the University, launching 8-10 startups and investing £6M into University of Cambridge companies every year. Their key focus is growing the sustainability portfolio, with over 20 companies joined since 2020. Not just investors, their goal is to be the best first cheque connecting first founders to mentors, co-investors, and customers.

King's Entrepreneurship Lab (E-Lab), is an initiative of King's College Cambridge, launched in September 2021. Their aim is to foster innovation and cultivate a community of entrepreneurial minds at the heart of the University of Cambridge. They achieve this through a wide range of activities, spanning both commercial and social ventures. At the core of their philosophy lies a commitment to sustainability and ethics.

Energy IRC is a University-wide Interdisciplinary Research Centre which supports the activities of over 250 Cambridge academics working in energy research. Energy IRC supports academics with interdisciplinary funding opportunities and industry engagement to increase the impact of the University's research into the global energy transition away from fossil fuels.

The Canopy is a community of impact-led start-ups, entrepreneurs, and small businesses accelerating solutions to global sustainability challenges. Part of the University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL), the Canopy provides workspace, business support, and access to knowledge and networks across the innovation, academic, and corporate ecosystems.

The Maxwell Centre is the centrepiece for industrial engagement with the physical scientists and engineers working in the Cambridge West Innovation District. Two-way flow of ideas and researchers adds value when 'blue-skies' activities meet research objectives relevant to economic opportunities for industry and society at large. The scale of industrial involvement is already substantial, and this will be increased through the activities in the building, in the collaborating Departments, and in the commercial space on the Cambridge West site. The associated industrial research, development, and manufacturing will generate an overall economic impact within the UK much greater than the co-investment committed to the programme.