

2026 Smart Thinking Awards Application Form

Applying for categories

Eligible think tanks may apply for as many award categories as they would like however they are allowed only one entry per category. If you submit more than one entry in a category, both will be considered invalid. The judges will not see how many categories you have applied for.

If you do not wish to apply for a category then simply skip to the next section. All responses auto-save but we would recommend also saving a copy on your own local computer as you go along in case of technical failure. Once your form has been submitted it cannot be amended. You will receive an automatic confirmation that we have received your application.

If you are applying for most/all categories then you may need to split your application across two forms due to the form size being too large. We will then combine them into one when we send you the confirmation of application.

All applications are confidential. The information you share will only be read by the judging panel and by Smart Thinking as administrators of the awards. We will not disclose who has applied for each category apart from any shortlisted, commended or winning entries.

Smart Thinking will use the information provided here for the sole purpose of administering and awarding the Smart Thinking Awards and will never share this information without your permission.

By applying for an award(s) you agree to:

- Make at least one person from your senior leadership team available from your organisation to attend the awards ceremony on Wednesday 18th November 2026;
- If you win or are shortlisted for a prize you will share that with your own audiences on social media and across your digital presence. Smart Thinking looks forward to receiving your assistance in publicising this achievement and will provide digital files and marketing materials to assist with this.

Applications are open from 9am on Monday 1st June 2026 and close at 5pm on Friday 31st July 2026. Any applications received after this date will not be accepted.

These awards are looking at the qualifying period 1st September 2025 - 31st July 2026.

If you have any issues with your application form please email awards@smarthinking.org.uk.

* Indicates required question

1. Please tick here to confirm that the information you will be providing is truthful and correct to the best extent of your knowledge.

Check all that apply.

☐ I confirm the information submitted is truthful and correct to the best of my knowledge

2. Name of think tank *

3. Primary contact for think tank *

4. Primary contact mobile number *

5. Primary contact email address *

6. Please tick to confirm that your think tank meets all the following criteria:

Your think tank must meet all the following criteria to be eligible to be entered into any award category.

- The organisation must be based or headquartered in the UK;
- The organisation must have as its primary aim the production of rigorous research and analysis of public policy;
- The organisation must include a central research function which is focused on this analysis and production of public policy research and expertise;
- The organisation must have at least one full time researcher;
- The majority of the organisation's research output must be freely available to the public;
- The organisation must have a substantial body of work in at least one research area. This would typically be at least 5 in-depth policy reports;
- You must be operating for at least 12 months before the close of the qualifying period of entry (i.e. for 12 months before 31st July 2026);
- The governance of the organisation is robust with an independent board of trustees or advisory council;
- The organisation should be set up as a not-for-profit organisation.

In summary you must demonstrate that your think tank has a lasting and meaningful ability to contribute to a constructive policy dialogue.

Think tanks based in universities are eligible to apply.

The judging panel has sole discretion on whether a think tank is eligible to enter the awards. Details of discussions among judges remain confidential and we are unable to share any reasoning behind a decision of non-eligibility.

If you have any questions about eligibility then please contact Smart Thinking at awards@smarthinking.org.uk.

Mark only one oval.

☐

I confirm that our think tank meets the criteria above

Think Tank of the Year

This is the top award category and will be presented last at the awards ceremony.

To be considered for this category you will not just be a great convener or have produced a brilliant publication but will be able to demonstrate impact and excellence across a number of areas. This is the top prize - how have you captured the policy zeitgeist this year and really driven impact or change?

Think Tank of the Year is for those organisations who are punching above their weight. The judges are looking for think tanks that drive the policy agenda forward through the quality of their work and their influence on the overall policy debate. This impact could be in influencing government, opposition parties or elsewhere.

The judges are looking for examples of why your think tank matters and how it has outperformed during the qualifying period.

We have deliberately left the application questions open so that you have the freedom to show the judges why you think your organisation deserves to win this award. You may wish to include examples of events, publications, media, policy impact, or convening power.

We appreciate that a lot of important work occurs in private meetings or discussions and you may be unable to share these in any detail. All applications remain confidential but you will need to be able to outline how you have been involved in such discussions.

We are looking at the period 1st September 2025 - 31st July 2026.

Judging criteria

Outstanding contribution

Impact on policy/politics

Rigour of research

Convening power/influence

Originality

7. Please summarise why your think tank should be the Think Tank of the Year?

(Max 500 words)

8. Provide three examples of your work/impact that you think demonstrate why you are the Tank of the Year and explain why they demonstrate this. You may wish to share three different examples that show you competing across as many of the judging criteria as possible.

(Max 250 words per example)

Example 1

9. Example 2

10. Example 3

One to Watch

To be eligible to enter this award your think tank must have been set up less than 5 years from the start of the qualifying period (1st September 2025). If you applied to this award last year you are eligible to apply again if your start date still falls within the 5 year period.

The judges are looking for those organisations that are offering a new and exciting voice in the policy sphere. For this award the judges are not just looking for excellence but also want to see your think tank's potential.

We have deliberately left the application questions open so that you have the freedom to show the judges why you think your think tank deserves to win this award. You may wish to include examples of events, publications, media, policy impact, or convening power.

NB: If you are not sure whether you meet this criteria then please contact us on awards@smarththinking.org.uk and we can advise you on eligibility.

Judging criteria:

Impact so far

Originality of mission/focus

Identified and targeted a policy need/gap

Potential for future impact on UK policy space

Excellence in work

11. Please outline your think tank's start date, mission and what its main achievements so far have been.

(Max 300 words)

12. How are you injecting new interest or excitement into your areas of focus/the wider policy discussion? Please provide 3 examples that demonstrate this.

(Max 300 words)

13. Please provide a short summary of your plans for the next 12 months and how they demonstrate why you are the think tank to watch.

(Max 250 words)

Think Tanker of the Year

The top individual award! Each organisation may submit ONE staff member for this award. This category is open to ALL think tank staff, excluding organisation Chief Executives. You may nominate the same person for this category and Researcher of the Year.

The judges are looking for people who have both demonstrated excellence in their job and have also played a vital role in enhancing their think tank's reputation and / or have had an impact on the overall policy debate. They are looking for people who have approached their work creatively, regularly taken the initiative and thought outside the box.

You may nominate the same person that you nominated last year.

The judges are looking at the qualifying period (1st September 2025 - 31st July 2026).

Judging criteria:

Excellence in job

Contribution to their think tank

Impact on the overall policy debate

Taken the initiative

Outside the box/creative thinking

14. Who is the staff member you would like to nominate as Think Tanker of the Year?

15. Please list their email address - this is for any potential invite to the awards ceremony.

16. How has the nominated person demonstrated excellence and impact in their job? Please provide examples of where they have demonstrated this.

(Max 300 words)

17. Please explain how they have made an outstanding contribution to your organisation and/or had a wider impact in the overall policy debate during the qualifying period.

(Max 300 words)

18. Why did you nominate this person for this award? Why should they be considered the Third Tanker of the Year?

(Max 300 words)

Researcher of the Year

This award is only open to those working in a research capacity and who are not the think tank's Chief Executive. Think tanks may nominate ONE researcher from their organisation.

The judges are looking for researchers who have both demonstrated excellence and rigour in their research work and outputs.

Entries need to demonstrate excellent research skills and the production of rigorous research as well as provide examples of high quality publications and outputs that have had an impact outside of their organisation.

You may nominate the same person that you nominated last year.

The judges are looking at the qualifying period (1st September 2025 - 31st July 2026).

Judging criteria:

Rigorous research

Excellent writing

Originality

Impact/policy relevance of research

Innovative approach to research

19. Who is the staff member you would like to nominate as Researcher of the Year?

20. Please list their email address - this is for any potential invite to the awards ceremony.

21. Why have you nominated this person for Researcher of the Year?

(Max 300 words)

22. Please provide one example of their work published in the qualifying period that best demonstrates the quality of their research and outputs. You should select the best publication they have published in the qualifying period.

Please list the title, any other authors and date of publication and why you think it best demonstrates the above.

(Max 200 words)

23. Please attach an extract of the publication selected above. *[Please attach no more than 2 pages of writing that best demonstrate the quality of their research - we recommend a standalone extract or a stand out section]*

Files submitted:

24. What was the impact of this research? How did it have impact outside your organisation?

(Max 300 words)

25. What was the methodology? Were there any interesting or unusual techniques used in the course of the research?

Please summarise the methodology used in 300 words or less.

Best publication

Each think tank may submit ONE publication, published between 1st August 2025 and 31st July 2026 for consideration by the judges. It can be any length of publication but excludes blogs or articles. Please note the qualifying period is different for this one category to reflect the adjusted period from last year however, you are not permitted to resubmit a publication from August 2025 if you previously submitted it to the 2025 awards.

If it is an annual publication then it can be resubmitted this year so long as the edition you are submitting was published within the qualifying period.

The judges are looking for publications that have made a strong argument, grounded in evidence. Entries are encouraged to show where they have had impact, can demonstrate originality, have persuasively argued for a change or for a new policy focus, are well-written and engaging. The nominated publication should also have rigorous research at its core.

To demonstrate why your publication should win this award you may wish to include information on impact, coverage, new data, whether it has provided a fresh perspective on a topic, if it includes practical and innovative recommendations, and whether any of its suggestions have been taken up by government or other policymakers.

Judging criteria:

Impact

Rigour of research

Well-written

Convincing argument

Originality of work

26. Please provide the publication's title, author name(s), publication date and a short summary of what the publication is about.

(Max 200 words)

27. Please explain why this publication should win this award category. You may wish to include examples on **impact**, coverage, new data, writing style, rigour of research, originality and creativity of the work and recommendations.

(Max 300 words)

28. What evidence has been provided within the publication to support its conclusions? Please summarise the methodology and methods used.

(Max 300 words)

29. Please upload the executive summary [max 5 pages]. If you submit more than 5 pages the judges are under no obligation to read anything exceeding 5 pages.

Files submitted:

Best Convener

This award is looking to recognise think tanks that have used their convening power to have impact and move the dial on a policy issue.

Best Convener is for those that are bringing together different groups to help move a policy debate forward or who have created a compelling story through an event or series of events.

It is not necessarily about having high-profile events or being able to secure senior politicians as speakers. Involving experts in your work is just as important as hosting politicians.

Entries could be one big high-profile event, or a series of events coalescing around a key theme. It could also be business as usual for your think tank but within that you are able to tell a clear story about what your events have achieved and what is special about this year.

The judges are looking for entries that demonstrate innovation - in format, topics, speakers and focus, and that can show how together they have had real impact.

Qualifying events include all public events as well as private events, for example roundtables, that contribute to the policy discussion. You may wish to include examples of where you have been the first to convene certain groups, where you have showcased new talent and promoted voices from outside Westminster, where you have thought hard about how to use your convening power to effect change.

The nominated event(s) must have taken place between 1st September 2025 and 31st July 2026. If you are nominating a series of events then the bulk of the series must have taken place during this period.

Judging criteria:

Policy relevance

Quality of speakers or participants

Innovative format or approach

Impact

30. Please outline the event or series of events you think best demonstrates your convening strength.

(Max 150 words)

31. Please tell us why this event/events series matters. What did you aim to achieve with it?

(Max 300 words)

32. Please explain how this event/events series moved the dial/had impact in a meaningful way in this particular area. (Max 300 words)

Best Campaign

Think tanks are increasingly being more proactive in advocating for change to a wider audience.

The Best Campaign category is about recognising those campaigns that tell a compelling story, advocate for change and deliver real impact. This is the award that recognises a think tank's communications, public affairs and advocacy work.

Best campaign is not just about producing a report launch and social media campaign that gets a lot of attention, it is about those campaigns and communications built around a coherent workstream of research, publications, events and media that delivers and advocates for real impact.

The judges are also looking for evidence that your think tank had thought about what the objective for the campaign was, ahead of its launch, and had a plan to measure its success.

The nominated campaign must either have the majority of the campaign occur between 1st September 2025 and 31st July 2026 or if it is a longer-running campaign, have had significant events occur within the qualifying period to justify its inclusion in this year's awards.

Judging criteria:

Success - as measured by the think tank

Innovation in approach

Impact

Originality

33. Please briefly summarise the campaign. What did it broadly cover, what were the significant milestones?

(Max 200 words)

34. What was your objective for this campaign? How did you plan to measure success?

(Max 200 words)

35. How has this campaign added value, both to your organisation's work and to the wider policy discussion? You may wish to include examples of new methods of advocacy and reach, new audiences uncovered, how it has influenced the wider policy world, media, business and the general public.

(Max 400 words)

The Innovation Award

We are deliberately keeping the qualifying criteria for this broad. This can be an innovation in research, policy area, communications, operations or fundraising. We are looking for innovations where you can show us that you have done something differently or tried something new.

Are you incorporating AI into your work in novel and innovative ways? Has your think tank absolutely smashed it on TikTok? Have you created a completely new type of public event? Have you started researching an area that no one has really considered before? Have you created a brand new vehicle through which people can access your research? Have you come up with an idea that is generating massive efficiencies for your think tank?

The judges are looking for examples of where a think tank has tried something new, in any of its workstreams. We want to reward those who have taken risks to try and do something better in the future.

The qualifying period is 1st September 2025 - 31st July 2026.

Your submitted innovation must either be new during the qualifying period or have particularly broken through within this period if it is not new.

Judging criteria:

Originality

Execution

Innovativeness

Long-term impact on policy or the policy sector

36. Please summarise the innovation you are submitting for this category.

(Max 200 words)

37. Outline the idea behind it, how you executed it, what difference it has made either to your organisation or the policy discussion or to the sector more broadly.

(Max 400 words)

38. Why should this particular innovation win this award?

(Max 400 words)

Honorary mentions - a bit of fun!

And finally! Our 3 more lighthearted categories!

Each think tank may submit one entry for each category.

Answers must be from work published during the qualifying period 1st September 2025 - 31st July 2026.

39. Killer stat of the year - one line statistic

40. Niche report of the year - please include report title, author and a two sentence summary of the report

41. Report title of the year - please include any sub-titles that explain the content of the report

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