

Visitor Economy Renaissance Programme Guidance for Visitor Economy Grant Fund Applicants Round 2

You must read these Guidance Notes and accompanying FAQs in full before applying. Incomplete applications or those missing important supporting documentation will not be considered.

1. Introduction

The Visitor Economy, comprising retail, tourism, leisure, arts, culture, and heritage, is a vital component of Oxfordshire's economy and supports good health and wellbeing for local communities as well as visitors. Pre Covid, Oxfordshire had a thriving visitor economy which attracted 30 million visitors a year generating £2.5 billion for the local economy and supporting 40,000 jobs.

Whilst the visitor economy has been decimated globally due to COVID 19, with huge implications for national and local economies as well as individual businesses, jobs, means of travel, and wellbeing, it is now beginning the process of resetting itself and recovering. The Visitor Economy Renaissance Programme has been designed to help assist the recovery of this important economic sector.

The main aim of the Visitor Economy Renaissance Programme is to 'attract visitors and ensure that Oxford and Oxfordshire maintain their position as one of the UK's most desirable visitor destinations for local, national, and international visitors, with a focus on attracting value from all visitors and encouraging green and sustainable tourism and practices'.

Programme activities to be delivered by March 2024 include:

- Promotion via Strategic Marketing Campaigns – nine are being delivered,
- Improving business competitiveness and COVID resilience via the Visitor Economy Grants scheme (by June 24) and Growth Hub led business support and digital skills training.
- Rebuilding Market Share - launch of the Oxfordshire Welcome accreditation scheme and a Business Visitor Trade Project
- Strengthening sector leadership and co-ordination – delivery of the first Vision and Destination Management Plan for Oxfordshire

All of these objectives will need to support the visitor economy economically and also aim to reduce the risk of Covid-19 transmission linked to the visitor economy, through measures to enable residents and visitors to be and to feel safe. Therefore, assisting management of the ongoing pandemic and its impact on local communities and visitors to the destination is a key element.

2. Visitor Economy Grant Fund

The Visitor Economy Grant falls within the objective 'improve business competitiveness and COVID resilience'.

Recognition of the accelerated advances in the technology of distribution, acquisition, and channel management post COVID has meant new demands placed on Visitor Economy businesses has required them to explore new methods in how they manage their businesses, promote products and cope with ever changing booking uncertainty. However, post COVID there is renewed opportunity to attract new local, national, and inbound tourists to our destinations and businesses.

Businesses that can adapt, refresh, and renew experience led products, making use of technology innovation can position themselves to boost visitor numbers, safeguard jobs, and be more pandemic resilient.

The Visitor Economy Grant Fund is the latest initiative to be launched and managed by OxLEP Business, to enable businesses within the wider Visitor Economy in Oxfordshire to adapt and grow and to assist the recovery of this sector post COVID 19 impacts.

Visitor Economy Grants will be available to businesses who can demonstrate that they are operating within the visitor economy, with a primary function in one of the following sectors: tourism, culture, arts, leisure, events, hospitality, or independent retail and that the applicant business fulfils the necessary criteria and conditions in this application guidance.

The grant scheme will open to eligible businesses across two funding rounds.

Round 1 was closed and completed May 2023. The remaining funding will now be awarded in this second round.

Please note that this is a competitive grant competition. Submission of an application does not guarantee funding will be awarded. Also, due to the anticipated high volume of applications, we will be unable to provide feedback to applicants.

Key timings for the Scheme

Activity	Date
VEG scheme soft launch	w/c 24 July 2023
VEG scheme formal launch	16 August 2023
Deadline for questions via email only to VisitorEconomyGrant@Oxfordshirelep.com	10 September 2023
Submission deadline for registration	The pre-qualification questionnaire will open on 16 August 2023 and close on 30 August 2023 Applications will be assessed in priority order up to £700,000 worth of applications. A waiting list will be held.
Eligible applicants invited to apply	Eligible applicants will be notified by 30 August with information on how to apply
Submission deadline for full applications	14 September 2023
Assessment Period for Applications	01 September – 22 September
Grant panel	Expected 5 October
Applicants informed of final decision	Week commencing 9 October
Grant Funding Agreements issued for review and signature	From 16 October
Deadline for return of signed Grant Funding Agreements	31 October
Final claim deadline for submission of all approved project expenses and evidence of spend and defrayal	28 th May 2024
Completion of case studies for VEG	30 September 24

3. Eligibility for the scheme

Visitor Economy Grants will be available to small and medium sized businesses, including sole traders. The grants are not available to public or private organisations that are predominantly public funded. The business must be based and trading in Oxfordshire.

Businesses who received funding through the first round of the Visitor Economy Grant scheme cannot apply in this second round. Preference will also be given to businesses / organisations that haven't benefitted from an OxLEP Grant (this includes eScalate, ISfB, Kickstart, Business Investment Fund and Cherwell Business Adaptation Fund beneficiaries). Businesses who have received OxLEP Grant funding can still apply but will only be considered if funding allows.

Applications may be made by a business / organisation on behalf of a group of businesses / organisations (as a partnership or consortium) who wish to introduce and implement a project that delivers genuinely new provision for visitors. There must be a single lead applicant who is responsible for receiving and spending the full grant award directly with suppliers. The grant monies cannot be distributed to the other businesses / organisations to spend as part of the project.

Eligible grants will be for projects that deliver tangible outcomes that allow a business to:

- Adapt, diversify, or innovate its visitor economy offering.
- Encourage visitors to areas not traditionally known as 'hotspots' (heavily visited)
- Encourage shoulder season/off peak visitor opportunities.
- Encourage longer stays/overnight visitors.
- Support the county's aim to become Net Zero through adopting sustainable practices.

ALL applications will need to demonstrate how the project will have a positive impact on the wider visitor economy and also highlight how the organisation is continuing to minimise the risk of Covid-19 transmission in relation to increased visitor numbers, describing measures taken.

Eligible Sectors and Activities

To be eligible to apply, businesses must demonstrate that they are operating within the visitor economy, with a primary function in one of the following sectors:

Tourism

Passenger transport – Water and land
Hotels, holiday centres and villages, youth hostels and other collective accommodation,
Recreational camping grounds
Renting of cars and light motor vehicles
Renting and leasing of passenger water transport equipment
Travel agency and Tour operator activities
Activities of tourist guides
Visitor attractions

Culture

Cultural education
Museums activities
Operation of historical sites and buildings and similar visitor attractions
Botanical and zoological gardens and nature reserves activities

Arts

Performing arts and theatres
Operation of arts facilities, galleries, and studios

Leisure

Sports, recreation, and well-being activities for visitors
Amusement parks and theme parks and activity/ recreation centres

Events

Letting and operating of conference and exhibition centres
Activities of exhibition and gatherings – fair / festival organisers
Activities of conference organisers
Wedding venues

Hospitality

Distilling, rectifying, and blending of spirits.
Manufacture of cider, beer, and wine
Licensed restaurants, Unlicensed restaurants, and cafes
Take-away food shops and Mobile food stands.
Event catering activities
Licensed clubs, public houses, and bars

Independent Retail

Independent retailers based in Oxfordshire tourist destinations.

General Eligibility

- Grants cannot contribute to projects that are already underway, **any costs incurred before receipt of a Grant Offer Letter are not eligible and will not be included**. For the avoidance of doubt, retrospective project costs will not be eligible.
- Visitor Economy Grants are only available to SME businesses trading in the Oxfordshire administrative area.
- Grants can fund capital and revenue projects.
- Salary costs are not eligible – this includes salary time.
- Minimum grant value: £10,000
- Maximum grant value: £15,000
- There is a limit of one grant award per business. Businesses can apply for their own grant and be named as a supporting partner in another organisation's grant application. However, the two grants must not be directly connected or interdependent.
- Your business must comply with at least one of the three elements of the Minimal Financial Assistance (MFA) criteria, see below.
- Your business must be viable or have a credible plan to return to viability.
- All project costs need to be defrayed and claimed by 28th May 2024.

Eligible Projects

Example projects that would be considered include:

- Online booking software - enabling a direct booking facility from their website.
- Equipment or investment needed to deliver a new visitor experience which responds to a new trend.
- Electric vehicles where they will create a new opportunity for the business, in terms of doing something more/different that couldn't be done before, and contributing to Net-Zero PLUS at least one other outcome.
- Investment in outdoor spaces to increase capacity or offer all-weather areas.
- Technology for contactless check-in
- Equipment to deliver hybrid events/allow dual streaming.
- Development and delivery of a new or improved product, service, app, or experience.
- Creation of a bookable authentic product, guided experience, virtual tours, or venue show-rounds
- Digitalisation - e.g. Implementation of online booking/cashless payment systems/ creation of an APP.
- Activities to promote sustainable tourism, e.g. Secure cycle storage and maintenance equipment for use by visitors.
- Activities to more effectively engage international markets - e.g. website translation or the implementation of online booking/cashless payment systems to encourage international visitors.
- Purchasing of tools, equipment, software (12-month licence if purchased as a subscription) and trading approaches needed to implement business

innovations that are necessary to adapt to the current climate and changing behaviours.

- Adaptations to increase capacity or improve the visitor experience and consumer confidence in feeling COVID safe.
- Helping businesses to develop a new product or service which capitalises on changing consumer behaviour or emerging trends to generate a new revenue stream.
- Funding for capital equipment, renovation or refurbishments that don't require planning permission, for example:
 - Investment in and refurbishment of buildings, plant, machinery, and equipment (confirmation of availability of supply in the timeframe is required)
 - New capital items such as dual streaming tech, immersive technology, and AI
 - Digital design and data analytical capability for inventory and supply chain management
 - Software and/or licence costs relating to the above (where these can be capitalised)

Ineligible Projects

Examples of what the grant **CANNOT** support:

- Any project where the activities and outcomes are delivered after 28th May 2024,
- Working capital, e.g. rent payments, hire costs, stock purchases,
- Any motorised vehicles
- Funding for the payment of wage subsidies
- Grants for building extensions will not be considered - delivery timescales do not allow Visitor Economy Grant to support building extensions (whether requiring planning permission or not). Even where planning is granted many capital projects are delayed due to materials and labour shortages.
- Activities which would contradict, duplicate, or undermine HM Government domestic initiatives.
- VAT payments (other than project costs where VAT cannot be recovered from HMRC or for non-VAT registered businesses)
- Paying off debts or refinancing
- Purchase of financial investments
- Any statutory or legislative obligations, duties, or requirements (including statutory training)
- Hire purchases and/or asset finance arrangements.
- “Like-for-like” replacement of obsolete equipment with little or no added value.

Ineligible Activities

Under the UK Subsidy Control Commitments in force from 1st January 2021, some elements of activity cannot be supported. Therefore, Visitor Economy Grants cannot be:

- dependent on export performance – for example linking the grant to a specific export performance.
- contingent on the use of domestic content – for example stating that the grant recipient must use a minimum percentage of UK inputs in their product.
- provided to a non-viable business unless that business has a valid plan in place to return the company to viability.

4. What's available.

The capital and revenue fund has a limited budget available in the second round to support Visitor Economy businesses from across the county with grants ranging from £10,000 through to £15,000 per business. It is anticipated that the fund will support 16-25 Oxfordshire businesses with grants.

Grant projects will be paid in arrears. Only one claim will be accepted. Correct claims made on time will be paid approximately 4 – 6 weeks later, therefore **applicants must be confident that they can cash flow their project pending reimbursement.**

All activity, outcomes, and expenditure must be achieved, reported, and evidenced by 28th May 2024 at the latest. **Please note: if you submit your grant claim after this date, we will not be able to pay it.**

All grants are awarded as part of the Minimal Financial Assistance (MFA) exemption. All SMEs which receive support under this programme are being aided under the UK Subsidy Control Act (2022) as governed by The Subsidy Control (Gross Cash Amount and Gross Cash Equivalent) Regulations (2022 No. 1186). MFA allows SMEs to receive up to £315,000 over any period of 3 financial years (the current and two previous financial years).

If a company has already received £315,000 of MFA (also known as Small Amounts of Financial Assistance, Special Drawing Right (SDR)) or *De Minimis* State Aid within a three-year fiscal period, it will have to rely on one of the other allowances:

- COVID-19 Business Grant Allowance – up to £1,600,000
- COVID-19 Business Grant Special Allowance - if businesses have reached limits under the Small Amounts of Financial Assistance Allowance and COVID-19 Business Grant Allowance, they may be able to access a further allowance of funding under these scheme rules of up to £9,000,000.

For the avoidance of doubt, provided certain conditions are met, these three allowances can be combined for a potential total allowance of up to £10,915,000 (subject to exchange rates). If in doubt, please talk to an appropriate member of your

organisation to check before submitting your application form. This may take the form of other grants or business support received in the past.

You must complete the relevant table in the Application Form in full for all previous public sector support received in the last three years to confirm that you are eligible to receive a Visitor Economy Grant. You must inform us if you receive other public funding towards your project as this will have an impact on the level of grant funding that we can offer.

Please note: the grant value will be at the agreed percentage of your total approved, defrayed and claimed expenditure. Defrayal (i.e. expenditure from the company bank account) must be demonstrated as part of the grant claim, i.e. copies of quotation, invoice and payment from the business bank account.

5. VAT

VAT is potentially an eligible cost for Visitor Economy Grant projects; however, this will vary on a case-by-case basis and OxLEP cannot give VAT advice to applicants.

We recommend that you seek VAT advice when drafting your application. It is your responsibility to ensure that VAT is correctly treated within your grant project. Incorrect VAT treatment could lead to penalties from HMRC and you having to repay the VAT element of the grant that should not have been claimed.

It is your responsibility to include VAT if you need to claim it. If you do not include eligible VAT at the time of applying, the grant will be awarded based on net costs and VAT cannot be claimed.

6. Procurement

Provided you are not a Contracting Authority as defined in the Public Contracts Regulations (2015) you will be able to provide direct awards to suppliers for contracts below £24,999. You are required to justify the selected supplier by seeking and providing copies of up to three written quotes. If your total project costs are higher than £24,999, please note that a single supplier cannot exceed this threshold.

The evidence that you need to provide alongside your application for all procurement / supplier selections is:

- Copies of any quotations/screenshots.
- Quotations/screenshots must be clearly identifiable to the supplier and include the supplier's name, a date, price per item to be purchased/procured, if the amount is inclusive or exclusive of VAT and (where possible) the supplier letterhead/logo.

Please note – if you do not provide a quote for an item of expenditure your application will not be assessed.

7. Application process

All businesses must have also completed OxLEPs Business Support Tool since April 2022 to apply for the grant. This allows us to register your business and provide you with information on the wider support, including other grant funding, available to you. We will notify you at application stage if you need to do this.

Step 1: Pre-registration

The online pre-registration form will open on 16 August 2023 and close on 30 August 2023. It will include Business details, sector, grant amount requested and the outcomes that you want to achieve.

Only the first £700,000 worth of applications will initially be invited to apply.

We will continue to accept registrations up until the 30 August, which will be held on a waiting list. However, people with a declared disability that affects the time it will take to complete the registration form will have until 30 August to register.

Step 2: Grant Webinar

Eligible businesses below the £700,000 threshold will be required to watch a 'How to complete the grant application' webinar. This will be a pre-recorded zoom webinar sent to each applicant via a secure link.

Step 3: Application Form

When we see that the Grant Webinar has been watched in zoom, an application form (in word format) will be sent to the applicant to complete their application.

Notes to assist with completing the Application Form

The Application Form is a Word document that will be emailed to you if you are eligible to apply.

We require a formal quote for each item or service being included in your project and justification why you have selected a specific supplier, and how they contribute value for money. Quotes must be official and dated, e.g. be on headed paper / from the companies email account. They must include VAT where relevant.

If your total project cost is more than the grant requested, you must provide quotes for all items of expenditure included in the project.

You will also be required to complete a Declarations section including Subsidy Control Commitments, Insolvency, Conflict of Interests, Sharing Consent and Data Processing.

Step 4: Application Submission

Complete all information required and attach to an email. Ensure you have answered all questions as fully as possible. Incomplete submissions will not be considered.

This must be emailed to VisitorEconomyGrant@Oxfordshirelep.com by **Midday on 14 September 2023. You must submit:**

- A completed and signed application form
- A minimum of 2 quotes per item of expenditure.

8. The Assessment Process

Applications will be assessed by OxLEP, based on their answers to the following questions.

Question	Applicant guidance / questions to cover	Max score	Weighting
Grant Project and Delivery (1,000 words maximum)	What is your proposed grant project? What are the objectives of the proposed grant project? How will the project be implemented and managed? How will you spend the funds?	10	30
Impact of the grant on your business (500 words maximum)	Select from the dropdown list which Visitor Economy Grant outcomes your project will address (see Section 3 above for the list). How does your project meet each of the Visitor Economy outcomes that you have selected? To what extent will the grant help to mitigate the impacts of Covid-19 on the business and enable sustainable growth? How will you minimise the risk of Covid-19 transmission in relation to increased visitor numbers? To what extent will the project support the creation of new jobs and/or the safeguarding of existing jobs?	10	25
Impact of the grant on the wider economy (500 words maximum)	How will the project impact Oxfordshire? What benefits are there to the local economy? What benefits are there to the wider economy?	10	25
Value for money / added value (500 words maximum)	How does your project offer value for money for the public investment? How are you ensuring that your project is cost effective? What is the added value of the investment? What are your financial forecasts? What would happen without the grant?	10	20

Assessors will be scoring based on how comprehensive the answers are as follows:

Score	Definition
9 - 10	Excellent – answer provided exceeds the requirements in all areas with a high degree of added value from public funding. Comprehensive response with no or minor weaknesses identifiable.
7 - 8	Good – answer provided meets all the requirements and may exceed in a few areas, with some degree of added value. Reasonably comprehensive response with few weaknesses identified and these are not significant or material
5 - 6	Adequate - answer provided meets most or all the requirements but does not exceed them, with minimal added value. Response includes some weaknesses, but these are not material
3 - 4	Poor - answer provided does not meet some of the requirements and does not exceed them. No added value. Response includes significant weaknesses
1 - 2	Very poor - answer provided does not meet most of the requirements and does not exceed them. No added value. Response includes significant material weaknesses

A shortlist of applications will be passed to the Visitor Economy Grants Panel to select approved applications within the budget available. Shortlisting will be based on submissions that pass due diligence at the Full Application stage and one of the following approaches, depending on the number and quality of applications received:

- Either the highest scoring 1/3 of applications
- Or all applications which receive a score of 60% or higher
- Or the top scoring applications covering 125% of the value of the available Visitor Economy Grant pot.

The objective is to ensure that the Grant Panel is a competitive and selective process and does not simply rubber stamp the shortlist. The Visitor Economy Grant Panel is composed of representatives from OxLEP, Local Authorities, Destination Management Organisations and Businesses in Oxfordshire. Any applicant found to have attempted to unduly influence a Panel Member by contacting them to discuss an application will be disqualified from the process. It is crucial to ensure that grants are processed and awarded in a fair and transparent way and that no applicant has an advantage over any other.

The Panel will focus on assessing the following question:

- *What are the overall benefits and impacts of the project on Oxfordshire and the wider economy? - How will the project deliver tangible outcomes aligned to Improving business competitiveness and COVID resilience in Oxfordshire? How many impacts have been referenced in the application and how realistic are these?*

Applicants should only offer these outcomes where they are **possible and realistic**.

9. Nature of grant offer

All successful applicants must receive a minimum of 2 hours of 1:1 support from an OxLEP Business Advisor. The Visitor Economy Grant Funding Agreement will only be sent to applicants on completion of the first hour of support. Claims will only be paid if the second hour of support has been completed.

The agreement is time limited and will expire 14 days after the date it is issued to the Applicant. It is your responsibility to ensure that the Grant Funding Agreement is signed and returned to the Visitor Economy Grant team within the deadline. The Grant Funding Agreement **MUST** be signed by a current Director of the business or someone who is authorised to sign by the company.

Grant Funding Agreements will be sent to successful applicants via electronic signature software. This will eliminate the need for businesses to print and scan physical pages and will automatically return a copy of the signed document to both the Visitor Economy Grant Team and the business once the signature is complete.

If you are successful in being awarded a Visitor Economy Grant, you will be expected to:

- Receive 2 hours of support from an OxLEP Business Advisor
- Attend the grants claim webinar (or watch its recording) which covers how to spend and claim your grant.
- Provide all evidence required to process and verify the grant application and any subsequent claims.
- Provide all evidence as set out on the 'Visitor Economy Grant Impact Declaration Form' to supply details of any programme outcomes achieved because of the funding.
- Be proactive to promote and publicise the support you have received, e.g. success stories in the form of press releases, case studies.
- You must cooperate, if requested, with Freedom of Information Act requests or other communications unless there are clear reasons not to (for example, confidentiality around commercial issues, intellectual property, or patents etc.)
- Participate in any evaluation activities by the Visitor Economy Grant Programme Team, and the external evaluator.
- Maintain an asset register of all approved, funded items over £5000.

10. Making your grant claim

Any grant that is approved is only for the purpose stated in the Grant Funding Agreement.

Should the circumstances on which a grant application was based change, you must contact the Visitor Economy Grant Team to discuss before committing to making any payments. This may include, but is not limited to,

- a change of expected completion date,
- change of supplier,

- change to the project value,
- expected project outcomes, or,
- cancellation of the project.

If you are in any doubt, please contact the Visitor Economy Grant Team to discuss.

If your project overspends, then you will only be able to claim the grant value awarded. Grants should be claimed in line with the Expenditure Profile Plan you complete in your Application (this will be reflected as a Schedule of your Grant Funding Agreement). Please note that only one grant claim is allowed. You should submit a completed claim form (to be supplied) to the Visitor Economy Grant Team on your claim date for review and payment, subject to review and compliance checks. **Claims will only be accepted on completion of the second hour of 1:1 support.**

Reimbursement is based on actual defrayed expenditure. If your approved expenditure is less than anticipated the grant will reduce. If your project includes a contribution from you then the grant will be reduced in proportion to the overall reduction in expenditure.

In any case grant claims cannot be accepted after **28th May 2024** in line with our funding requirements.

For all expenditure on your project, you will need to meet the regulatory audit trail requirements including evidence of defrayal (monies leaving your bank account). This includes: -

- A copy of the supplier invoice(s) / receipts
- Proof of payment, namely a redacted business bank statement showing the relevant payment(s).

Your project claim must demonstrate that the project expenditure has been made through the bank account provided when accepting the grant (at Grant Offer stage). This should be a business bank account (unless you are a sole trader utilising a personal bank account).

Business credit cards can be used, but you must be able to evidence that the credit card has been repaid (by the business) before you claim.

Payment of supplier invoices cannot be made by cash or contra arrangements.

11. Outcomes

In the Full Application Form, you will need to provide details of any outcomes (i.e. improved customer offer, improved digital presence, etc.) to be achieved. See Section 3 for the list of potential Impacts you may wish to cite.

Applications which offer outcomes are likely to score more highly than those which do not. However, you must ensure that any outcomes promised are realistic as these are commitments not aspirations.

Once you have claimed your grant, we will provide you with the 'Visitor Economy Grant Outcomes Declaration Form' which you must use to confirm the details of the impacts achieved.

If you experience difficulties in achieving the outcomes as outlined in the Grant Funding Agreement, please contact us at your earliest convenience so that we can understand and discuss the options in relation to the grant payment. Please note that we reserve the right to claim the grant funding back from you if you do not achieve the outcomes.

12. Asset Register

You will be required to maintain an asset register of all purchases of items over £5,000. We may ask to see this register at any time and may also visit your premises to verify the purchase(s) and record identification details.

Please be aware that if you dispose of the item(s) before they are fully depreciated, OxLEP reserves the right to reclaim a proportion of the grant.

The detailed information that you will be required to maintain includes:

- Asset name and description.
- Serial or identification number.
- Location of the asset (including post code);
- Purchase price (£) (net recoverable VAT);
- Date of acquisition.
- Approved Use of Asset.
- Legal Registered Owner of Asset.
- Method of Depreciation.
- Date of Depreciation.

We may require photographic evidence of assets to show to auditors. If this is necessary, we will contact you and confirm what images we need.

13. Further Information

OxLEP reserves the right to visit you to ensure the grant has been used for the purpose it was intended as stated in the application form and to inspect records to show costs have been incurred by you.

Your grant activity may also be subject to scrutiny by auditors from OxLEP, Oxfordshire County Council (as OxLEP's accountable body), BEIS and the National Audit Office.

14. Contact Us

Please ensure that you read these Guidance Notes plus the supporting FAQs in full, and watch the accompanying webinar, prior to submitting a query. If you still have any outstanding questions having reviewed all the supporting material, please contact us via email at VisitorEconomyGrant@Oxfordshirelep.com