

Rural England Prosperity Fund Business Grant

Guidance for Rural England Prosperity Fund applicants

1. Introduction

Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP) is administering Cherwell District Council's Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) Business Grant Scheme.

The Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) supports the aims of the government's Levelling Up White Paper and Future Farming Programme. It funds capital projects for small businesses.

REPF aims to improve productivity and strengthen the rural economy and rural communities. This Rural Business Grant Scheme has been developed in line with the REPF guidance and local need.

The scheme looks to support capital investments in the following priority sectors:

- Retail - serving local community
- Farm diversification (non-agricultural)
- Food and drink production sector
- Hospitality and Leisure
- Manufacturing sector

Applications are welcome from all Rural Cherwell businesses. For REPF purposes rural areas are defined as towns, villages and hamlets with populations below 10,000 and the wider countryside market or 'hub towns' with populations of up to 30,000 that serve their surrounding rural areas as centres of employment and in providing services (this includes Kidlington businesses).

REPF Grants are available to existing micro and small businesses which have been trading within the Cherwell area for at least 12 months at the point of submission of Expression of Interest. REPF grants will be between £5,000 and £20,000 for capital only projects that deliver tangible outcomes aligned to four 'delivery themes':

- Business retention and growth
- Green economy
- Investment in rural communities

- Strengthening the rural economy and rural communities

You must complete the OxLEP [Business Support Tool](#) before submitting your Expression of Interest (EOI) as a requirement to apply. If you are awarded a grant, we expect you to attend a minimum of 6 hours of support delivered through the [Cherwell SPARK or Accelerator Programme](#).

All grant claims and evidence of defrayal must have been submitted to OxLEP by 12pm 27 March 2025 at the latest. Any claims received after this date will be rejected, and payments not made to grant recipients.

The scheme will operate as a competitive, two-stage application process which will be available through an online portal. The Expression of Interest (EOI) questionnaire will launch on 21 October 2024 and close at 5pm on 4 November 2024. The deadline for full REPF applications is 12pm on 25 November 2024. If demand is higher than anticipated, we reserve the right to close applications early. The total grant funding available is up to £330k, however we anticipate accepting £800k of applications at Expression of Interest stage and £660k at full application stage.

Please note that this is a competitive grant competition. Submission of a pre-qualifying questionnaire or of an application does not guarantee funding will be awarded.

We anticipate that REPF will support up to 64 eligible local businesses with grants.

Applications will be reviewed in line with the process set out in these Guidance Notes and we aim to complete this and notify applicants of grant award decisions by close of play (COP) on the 17 December with Grant Funding Agreements to follow by 20 December 2024.

Please note that due the high volume of applicants we will be unable to provide feedback to applicants.

We strongly advise that you read these Guidance Notes in full, and you ***must watch*** the recorded REPF grants webinar. Incomplete applications or those missing important supporting documentation will not be considered.

Key timings for the Scheme

Activity	Date
Soft launch with guidance	Week commencing 23 September 2024
Launch including grant application workshop/Expression of Interest (EOI) and full application	21 October 2024
EOI questions need to be submitted to cherwellrepf@oxfordshirelep.com	By 5pm on 28 October 2024
Expression of Interest (EOI) closes	5pm, 4 November 2024
Full application window opens	14 November 2024
Full application questions need to be submitted to cherwellrepf@oxfordshirelep.com	By 5pm on 18 November 2024
Submission deadline for full Applications	12pm, 25 November 2024
Assessment Period for Applications including due diligence, panel assessment and panel	25 November to 16 December 2024
Applicants informed of final decision	17 December 2024
Grant Funding Agreements issued for review and signature	By 20 December 2024 (via email).
Deadline for receipt of fully signed Grant Funding Agreements by OxLEP	By 5pm on 2 January – offer will be revoked and funding reallocated if Agreement is not received by OxLEP by the deadline
Final claim deadline for submission of all approved project expenses and evidence of spend and defrayal	12pm, 27 March 2025
Final claim payments issued by OxLEP	By 30 April 2025

**We cannot guarantee that the online application process will be compatible with mobile technology, so we suggest that you arrange to have access to a laptop or computer to complete the online Application Form. We also suggest that you install the most recent version of your web browser in advance.*

2. What's available

REPF grants will be in the range of £5,000 - £20,000.

Grants must deliver against at least one of the REPF priorities:

- Jobs created
- Jobs safeguarded
- Number of diversification projects supported (including farm)
- Increased R&D and product development
- Diversification into new business markets
- Increased exporting capacity (manufacturing, production and services)
- Successful transition of business operations to net zero carbon emissions and lower carbon footprint
- Number of businesses adopting new-to-the-firm technologies

All applications must be able to evidence match of 25% of the total value of the grant project being requested. For example, a £5,000 grant project will require £1,250 of match to be evidenced (25%) and will receive a grant of £3,750 (75%). The total cost of delivering the project may well be over and above the total costs included in your grant application. This is acceptable and these additional costs are outside of the grant.

Grant claims will be paid in arrears, so applicants must be confident that they can cash flow their project pending reimbursement. You will be reimbursed on submission of a single claim at the end of your grant project. All activity, outcomes, and expenditure must be achieved, reported, evidenced and claimed by 12pm on the 27 March 2025. **Please note: if you submit your grant claim after this date, we will not be able to pay it.**

All REPF grants are awarded as part of the Minimal Financial Assistance (MFA) element of the UK Subsidy Control Requirements. MFA allows a business to receive up to £315,000 of subsidy over a three-year rolling period (i.e. the current and previous two financial years). This includes any subsidy awarded under other MFA schemes or an aid awarded under the EU De Minimis scheme.

Please note: the grant value will be reimbursed at 75% of your total approved, defrayed and claimed expenditure, capped at the maximum grant payable as per your Grant Funding Agreement. 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 defrayal.

3. Nature of grant offer

Given the short timescales for the REPF grant scheme, we have produced a webinar covering the mechanics of applying to and managing a REPF grant project. If you are unable to join the webinar live, you are required to watch the recording of this webinar in full and must complete a self-declaration as part of the application to confirm that you have done so. The platform we use for the webinar will allow us to review those who have watched the recording.

Grants cannot contribute to projects that are already underway, **any costs incurred before receipt of a Grant Funding Agreement are not eligible and will not be included.** For the avoidance of doubt, retrospective project costs will not be eligible.

If you are willing to start working on the project without the grant, it is debatable whether the funding is needed for the activity to proceed as you had sufficient funding to be able to commence the project.

4. Eligibility

Having received an OxLEP or other grant in the past or made a grant application will not affect your application for a REPF grant and brings no advantage or disadvantage. However, 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 REPF grant.

Eligibility

- REPF is only available to small businesses trading in the Cherwell District Council administrative area for at least 12 months at the point of submission of Expression of Interest.
- For the purposes of this scheme small businesses are defined as those with up to 49 employees (FTE) and an annual turnover of less than £10million.
- Applicants must not have received Farming Investment Fund or Farming in Protected Landscapes Programme funding
- Eligibility for the scheme is based on project location and will be determined through DEFRA's Magic Maps. If a project is not in an eligible area, applicants will be informed that we are unable to proceed with the application.
- Grants can fund capital costs only
- Minimum grant value: £5,000
- Maximum grant value: £20,000

- Your business must comply with the requirements of the Minimal Financial Assistance (MFA) Subsidy Allowance
- Your business must be viable, or have a credible plan to return to viability
- All project costs need to be defrayed and claimed by 12pm, 27 March 2025
- Applicants must have attended a REPF grant webinar or watched recording (which is trackable by OxLEP)

Eligible projects

Examples of what the grant **CAN** support includes but is not limited to:

- Capital equipment
- Renovation or refurbishments (that do not require planning permission or already have planning permission in place)
- Net zero and sustainability infrastructure, including solar panels, EV chargers, air-source heat pumps and more
- Creation and expansion of rural leisure and tourism businesses
- Diversification of farm buildings outside of agriculture
- Purchase of equipment for food processing and promotion
- Diversification

All projects/claims must be delivered within scheme timelines as detailed in grant timeline.

Ineligible projects

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

- Working capital
- Funding for the payment of wage subsidies
- Grants for building extensions will not be considered - delivery timescales do not allow REPF 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.
- Grants for EV fleet will not be considered however EV charging infrastructure is eligible. Note - An 'electric vehicle fleet' or 'EV fleet' is a collection of zero-emission vehicles owned or leased by a business for operational use.
- 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
- 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, REPF 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

5. VAT

VAT is potentially an eligible cost for REPF 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

Please read this section carefully

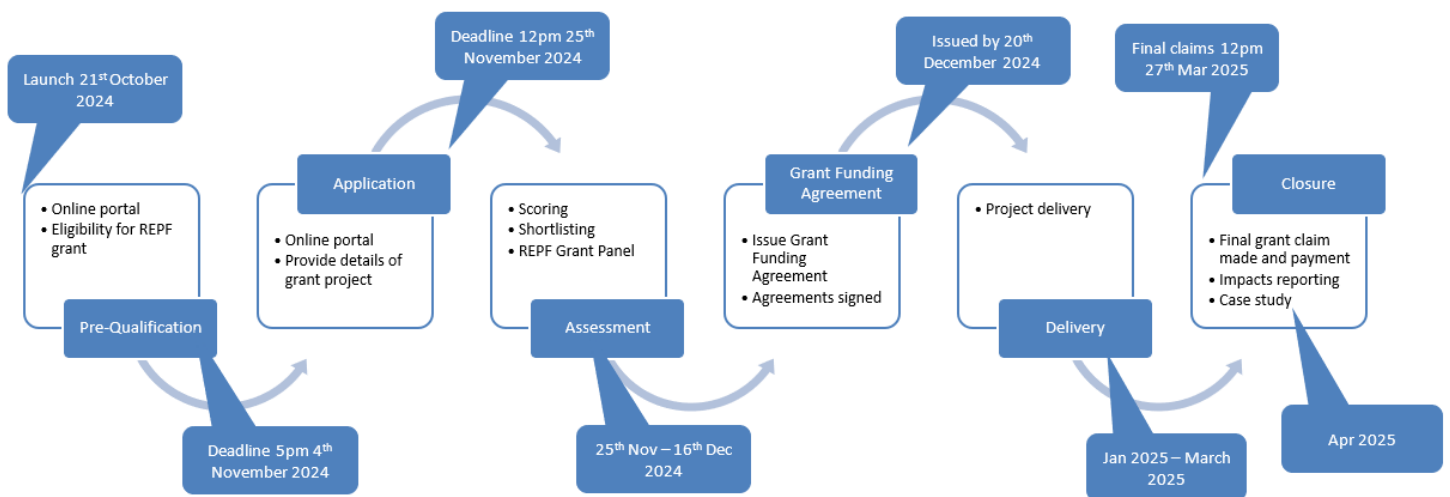
Provided you are not a Contracting Authority as defined in the Public Contracts Regulations (2015) you will be able to provide direct awards to suppliers for contracts below £100,000. You will be required to justify the selected supplier by seeking and providing copies of three written quotes. Given the value of the grants that we will be awarding, we do not anticipate any supplier cost will exceed £100,000. In the unlikely event that a single supplier will exceed this threshold, you must contact the OxLEP REPF team to discuss your approach before submitting your application. Equally, if you are unable to provide three written quotes for any item included in your grant, please also contact the OxLEP REPF team for a conversation before you submit.

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
- Justification for your choice of selected supplier and how they contribute value for money.

7. Application process

All applications will be treated fairly and consistently in line with the process set out below:



The first step is to complete the Expression of Interest questionnaire (EOI) a link to which will be shared. The EOI checks your eligibility to receive a REPF grant and must be completed by 5pm on 4 November 2024. If you pass the EOI phase, you will receive a link to the online application form by 5pm on the 14 November 2024 which must be completed by 12pm on the 25 November 2024.

We recommend completing the EOI early to give yourself as long as possible to complete the application form. Please ensure that your EOI details, e.g. anticipated grant requested, are as accurate as possible to help us manage the programme.

Please note:

- The application form does not have a save function, so must be completed in one session. We will provide a Word template which you can use to draft your answers to then copy and paste into the portal.
- Uploads have a maximum 50-character filename limit, please ensure file names are 50 characters or less.
- Only one submission is allowed and at the point you submit your application it will drop into the assessment process.

We aim to inform applicants by COP on 17 December 2024 whether their application has been successful. Applicants will be advised as early as possible if there is likely to be a delay to this timescale.

Applications will be assessed against the prescribed scoring criteria (see Section 8) by OxLEP. A shortlist of applications will be passed to the REPF Grant 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 REPF grant pot

The objective is to ensure that the Grant Panel is a competitive and selective process and does not rubber stamp the shortlist. If applications are not of sufficient quality the Grant Panel may choose not to commit the full REPF grant pot.

The REPF Grant Panel is composed of representatives from OxLEP and Cherwell District Council.

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.

8. Scoring criteria

8A. EOI will be assessed using the following criteria:

EOI that offer the best value for money in terms of outputs compared to grant requested and project activities.

Full Applications will be assessed using the following criteria:

Question	Applicant guidance / questions to cover	Assessment criteria	Max score	Weighting
Grant Project and Delivery (1,000 words maximum)	Describe the objectives of the proposed grant project Describe your proposed grant project Describe how the project will be implemented and managed	Is the project in scope? Are the project aims and objectives clear and well-structured? Have they explained how they want to spend the funds? Have they provided a plan of work or explained their approach to delivery? Does the application give enough detail to understand the proposed grant project?	10	30
Impact of the grant on your business (500 words maximum)	Select from the dropdown list which REPF priority / priorities your project will address (see Section 2 above for the list). To what extent will the grant help enable sustainable growth? To what extent will the project support the creation of new jobs and/or the safeguarding of existing jobs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How significant will the impact be on the applicant (based on current situation)? To what extent are they addressing the REPF priorities of new jobs created Jobs safeguarded 	10	25

Rural England Prosperity Fund

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of diversification projects supported (including farm) • Increased R&D and product development • Diversification into new business markets • Increased exporting capacity (manufacturing, production and services) • Successful transition of business operations to net zero carbon emissions and lower carbon footprint • Number of businesses adopting new-to-the-firm technologies 		
Impact of the grant on the wider economy <i>(500 words maximum)</i>	How will the project impact Cherwell and Oxfordshire? What benefits are there to the local and wider economy?	How significant are the potential impacts on Cherwell? How significant are the impacts on Oxfordshire and the wider economy? To what extent do these seem realistic and achievable?	10	25
Value for money / added value <i>(250 words maximum)</i>	Demonstrate how your project offers value for money for the public investment. What is the added value of the investment? What would happen without the grant?	Are all costs supported by a copy of at least one valid quote? If quotes are missing, is there an explanation as to why? Is it clear whether VAT costs are included or not applicable? To what extent does the project offer good value for money? Has match funding	10	20

		been secured and evidenced? Are the financial forecasts reasonable? How significant and realistic is the impact of not receiving the grant?		
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Applications that pass due diligence checks and are shortlisted will proceed to the REPF Grant Panel for final review and award decisions. The Panel will focus on assessing the following question:

- *What are the overall benefits and impacts of the project on Cherwell and the wider economy? - How will the project deliver tangible outcomes aligned to improving productivity and strengthening the rural economy and rural communities, including creating and safeguarding jobs, increasing product development, diversification, increasing exporting capacity (manufacturing, production and services), transitioning of business operations to net zero carbon emissions and lower carbon footprint and adopting new-to-the-firm technologies in Cherwell? 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

The REPF Grant Funding Agreement is time limited and will expire at 5pm on the 2 January 2025. It is **your** responsibility to ensure that the Grant Funding Agreement is signed and returned to the REPF team within the deadline. The REPF team will not be sending following up emails to remind grant awardees.

Please note that Grant Funding Agreements will be sent out in December, it is therefore critical that you provide contact details of an authorised alternative if your main point of contact is likely to be on annual leave when the Agreements are issued.

Grant Funding Agreements will be sent to successful applicants via Adobe Sign. Adobe Sign 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 REPF Team and the business once the signature is complete.

Please note that the Grant Funding Agreement **MUST** be signed by a current Director of the business or someone who is authorised to sign by the company.

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 REPF 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 REPF Team to discuss.

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 REPF Team on your claim date(s) for review and payment, subject to review and compliance checks.

In any case grant claims cannot be accepted after 12pm on 27 March 2025 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 would include a copy of any supplier invoice(s) and proof of payment, namely a redacted business bank statement showing the relevant payment(s). Payment of supplier invoices cannot be made by cash or contra arrangements.

11. Deliverables

In the Full Application Form, you will need to provide details of any Deliverables (i.e. jobs created and or safe guarded, diversification into new business markets). See Section 2 for the list of potential Impacts you may wish to cite.

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

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

If you experience difficulties in achieving the deliverables 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 deliverables.

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 registry 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

In line with the UK's Subsidy Control Commitments, as REPF grants are awarded under MFA. You must sign a declaration setting out any previous MFA Subsidy or *De Minimis* aid you have received or been awarded from all sources over the current and previous two financial years. 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 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.

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), Cherwell District Council, the Department for Business and Trade (DBT) and the National Audit Office.

14. Notes to assist with completing the Application Form

If you have been invited to complete the Full Application Form, after the Expression of Interest (EOI) questionnaire, you will have received a personal URL link to complete the online form. Information submitted as part of your EOI has been pre-populated in the Full Application Form for you to streamline the process and avoid any duplication of data.

You will have space to construct your answers based on the questions outlined in the Scoring Criteria above.

We require three written quotes for all items being included in your project. You will be asked to justify for each item why you have selected a specific supplier and how they contribute value for money.

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

15. Submission

Complete all information required via the online Application Form and attach any supplementary information requested to support your submission. Ensure you have answered all questions as fully as possible. Incomplete submissions will not be considered.

If you are successful in being awarded a REPF grant, you will be expected to:

- Provide all evidence required to process and verify the grant application and any subsequent claims.
- Provide all evidence as set out on the 'REPF Impact Declaration Form' to supply details of any programme outputs achieved as a result of the funding.
- Co-operate, if requested, to promote and publicise success stories in the form of press releases, case studies, 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 REPF Programme Team, Cherwell District Council and the external evaluator.
- Maintain an asset register of all approved, funded items.

16. Contact Us

Please ensure that you read these Guidance Notes 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 cherwellrepf@oxfordshirelep.com by 5pm on 28 October 2024 for EOI and by 5pm on 18 November for full applications.