

# Vibrant Wiltshire Vacant Commercial Units Fund

## Applicant Guidance Notes

### Section 1 - Introduction to Guidance Notes

These guidance notes have been created to help you understand the aims of this grant scheme before you make an application for funding to Wiltshire Council.

Please read the notes carefully and ensure you've understood them before starting on your application form or sending it to us.

We expect applications to be made by the business owner or director.

If you would like support to help you understand the guidance notes or feel you are not able to complete the application form on your own, please contact the Grant Advisor using this email address: - [vibrant.wiltshire@wiltshire.gov.uk](mailto:vibrant.wiltshire@wiltshire.gov.uk).

You can also email the Grant Advisor for help if:

- You would find it easier to speak about this grant over the phone. (Please tell us this in your email and include your telephone number).
- You require a reasonable adjustment to make your application. (Please tell us a bit more about this in your email. We will support you if we judge that we are able to).
- You would like someone else to speak with us about this grant on your behalf. (Please tell us a bit more about the situation in your email).

Wiltshire Council welcome applications from people of all levels of ability. We are committed to supporting all enquiries and applicants through the application process.

We will continue to work with successful applicants to monitor how the grant has been spent for up to 3 years from the date of their grant offer letter.

### Section 2 - Why are the Council offering this grant?

Wiltshire Council has launched this Grant Scheme to bring vacant commercial spaces back into permanent or meanwhile/temporary use.

The grant scheme is funded by Wiltshire Council ("the Council") through the Wiltshire Towns Programme Fund.

The scheme aims to support the recovery of Wiltshire town centres. The scheme will focus on bringing businesses, creative and cultural activities, services, and community uses into the town centre.

Supporting businesses, and types of uses and activity will help to strengthen and diversify these areas, this will help to boost footfall, create new jobs, and enhance the sustainability of businesses.

### Summary of grant process:

- You will be an independent business, a charity or social enterprise, either registered or sole trader. Town and Parish councils where they want to occupy a retail premises or wish to sub-let to facilitate start-ups and pop-up provision can also apply.
- Your application will form part of your investment plan for improving a vacant premises located within the town centres listed below.
- The improvements will open-up premises for new commercial activity.
- Your full application and supporting information will be assessed for deliverability and to ensure it fits with the scheme purpose and intervention aims.
- If successful you will be awarded a grant and a contract will be offered with terms and conditions for expenditure of the grant.

### Section 3 - What kind of businesses are eligible for this grant?

This grant will support small or micro businesses, including new start-ups as well as existing businesses who wish to lease or rent a previously vacant commercial property located within the town centres listed below. Town and Parish councils where they want to occupy a retail premises or wish to sub-let to facilitate start-ups and pop-up provision can also apply.

### Eligible Town Centres (see Appendix A for a map of each individual eligible area)

Salisbury	Bradford on Avon
Trowbridge	Amesbury
Chippenham	Malmesbury
Devizes	Pewsey
Warminster	Cricklade
Melksham	Tidworth
Marlborough	Tisbury
Calne	Ludgershall
Corsham	Mere
Westbury	Wilton
Royal Wootton Bassett	Downton

## **Business type**

VW grants will support businesses who wish to establish trade in a currently vacant commercial property located within designated town centres.

Applicants will need to be one of the following to qualify:

- A registered business.
- A registered charity.
- A community interest company or other registered social enterprise
- A sole trader or self-employed person.
- Town and Parish councils where they want to occupy a retail premises or wish to sub-let to facilitate start-ups and pop-up provision.

You need to show that your business is financially stable by submitting your accounts. For all businesses, particularly sole traders and new businesses, the council may need to carry out credit check and due diligence. You are asked to submit your most recent financial accounts including a profit and loss (turnover) for the most recent trading period. Please include any financial projections for future trade. If you are sole trader, please submit your most recent tax return relating to the business, but please note, you will probably be asked for further information as part of assessment of your application. If you started trading less than 12 months ago, please state on the application your total turnover to date. If you are pre-income, please state when you will commence trading.

You will need to manage and deliver works, purchase items and equipment based on the specification and costs that were given in your grant application and confirmed in your grant contract.

Failure to deliver the plan, or breach of contract will result in the grant being reduced, withdrawn or clawed-back.

- Grant will be paid in arrears on presentation of a claim containing information on expenditure and performance. Expenditure is made at own risk.
- You may need to provide information about the grant's impact for up to three years.

## **Scheme purpose**

The scheme will focus on:

- bringing businesses, creative and cultural activities, services, and community uses into the town centre.
- making better use of premises by opening-up properties for active use will enhance the sustainability of the town centre.

Overall, the intervention aims to:

- achieve a more resilient and vibrant high street.
- encourage the diversification and revitalisation of the town centre through direct investment to deliver new workspace and space for emerging and independent businesses on the high street.

The scheme will support a range of investments made on the basis of:

- a new business to a town centre with lease or heads of terms on lease.
- a current business relocating within a town centre, with lease or heads of terms on lease.

### **Non-eligible businesses**

Regardless of the type of business and the circumstances for the investment, some types of businesses, organisations or types of activity will not be eligible for this grant scheme, including:

- betting shops, pawn brokers, amusement arcades, tobacconists / vape shops / shisha bars and any other shops or venues wholly or mainly offering goods or services of an adult or sexual nature.
- businesses or activities for political purposes or gain, for activities promoting religious beliefs or to proscribed organisations or organisations that support radicalisation or terrorism. This is not an exhaustive list, and we retain the right to add to it at any time.
- businesses that have or will exceed the Subsidy Control special drawings limits (of around £315,000 of public support over the past 3 years).
- applicants or businesses that are in administration, insolvent or where a striking-off notice has been made are not eligible for the grant. Applicants need to be in good standing with the council, including being fully paid up on any money owed to the council such as for business rates.

### **Section 4 - How much funding is available and what can it be used for?**

The Council has allocated £500k to this grant scheme in the financial years 23/24 and 24/25.

It is intended that the Vibrant Wiltshire – Reimagining our High Streets Fund will have one grant option:

#### **High Street Business Start Up and/or Relocation**

This grant will provide viability gap funding to businesses looking to open in a currently empty retail unit within the eligible locations.

It is available to businesses within the eligible areas and of all types, bar the above exceptions.

Applicants will need to set out a clear proposal in a simple application form, describing the activity they want to undertake, what they require funding for and evidence that they have sought to establish best value through quotes.

The aim of the grant is to bring empty retail premises back into use and the grant range is £1,000 to a maximum of £10,000.

### Grant lease requirements:

- Grants of up to **£3,000** require a signed lease for a minimum of **6 months** in duration and a copy of a recent stock invoice and 1 quote/website listing confirming the cost of the items requested with the grant alongside their completed application form.
- Grants of between **£3,001 and £10,000** require a signed lease for a minimum of **12 months** in duration and a copy of a recent stock invoice and 2 quote/website listing confirming the cost of the items requested with the grant alongside their completed application form.

### In addition:

- Quotes for works to the property costing £500 or more must be itemised and clearly relating to the wording you've entered in the item list. They must be formal quotes, on a headed document from a professional contractor.
- Quotes for equipment to be used in the property costing £500 or more can be either formal quotes from a wholesaler in the format listed above or screenshots/links showing the item at an online retailer.
- If you are requesting an amount that is more than the lowest cost quote you have provided, we will ask you to explain to us why the more expensive quote or item is necessary and how the added cost significantly benefits your business. If we do not agree with your justification, we may reject this item line or offer to fund the lower cost item.
- You must be able to provide proof that the property owner approves of any requested refurbishment works. You must also confirm whether you require planning permission when submitting your application to us.
- **You must not start any works or purchase any requested equipment until you have received and signed your grant offer letter.** We are not able to pay for any works already started or equipment already purchased before our grant offer is confirmed.

Here are some examples of costs that **are eligible** (see also Net Zero below):

- heritage enhancements
- new/enhanced shopfront
- equipment
- machinery
- building works
- fixtures and fittings
- electrical appliances, and
- other similar one-off items to help occupy the currently vacant unit

Here are some examples of costs that are **not eligible**:

- stock
- rental or lease deposit or costs
- business rates
- staffing costs
- insurance costs

- new equipment that is not integral to your business providing services at the property (such as day-to-day consumables, staff room equipment, computers)
- website costs
- marketing and comms

## Net Zero

These improvements will help businesses benefit from saving on running costs, and provide with a reputational boost. A more energy efficient workplace can often be a better working environment. With improvement such as modern LED lighting, better heating controls or reduced drafts, improved efficiency can result in a happier workforce and happier customers.

**Applications which support a business' contribution to efforts to mitigate climate change and reduce its own carbon emissions will be prioritised by the decision-making panel.**

Eligible items (not an exhaustive list):

- LED lighting
- lighting controls
- boilers/heating plant
- heating / cooling controls
- specialist equipment (e.g. compressors, manufacturing tools)
- more efficient refrigeration equipment
- heat recovery systems
- insulation – loft, wall, pipework
- window coating
- solar installations (providing no feed-in-tariffs are claimed)
- SUP alternatives

## Section 5 - Do my requested works require Planning Permission?

Planning permission is required for works that involve a material change to the external appearance of a shop or building. Examples of this are alterations to the fascia, the windows or the doorway, changes to the type of material used or the installation of awnings, blinds or security shutters. Advertisement consent is required for the display of certain types of signs. You may also require planning permission for change of use to the property.

If you are unsure whether your works require planning permission, you should seek further guidance from the planning service. Please go to the webpage <https://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/article/854/Planning-and-building-control> to begin your planning application and receive accurate information.

## Subsidy control

As a public authority, Wiltshire Council is subject to the UK subsidy control regime, which means that certain conditions must be adhered to when awarding grants that come under the definition of a subsidy. Within the regime there are a number of financial thresholds which depending on if they are met or not, changes the process that needs to be followed under the

regime. Because of this, when completing the application form, you will be asked to provide information about past funding you have received. The council will check your circumstances and notify you about the subsidy implications, if there are any. Payment of grant your grant will be paid in arrears following a satisfactory claim.

This means:

- you will be required to sign a Minimum Financial Assistance (MFA) notification letter, requiring that you have not received more than [£315,000 minus the value of the subsidy] in MFA subsidies or comparable types of subsidies (see section 42(8) of the Subsidy Control Act) between 1 April [year beginning the calculation period] and this date.
- you will arrange for and then pay for works and items purchased for the project.
- you will make a claim showing the expenditure on standard form.
- council officers will check to ensure that the expenditure is eligible under the scheme and fits with the scheme purpose.
- if satisfied, the council will pay the grant. The council will offer all projects the ability to make 'interim' claims. This will help you manage the project's finances by receiving grant in stages, as you make an interim claim at staged intervals.

## **Section 6 - How does the council decide whether to award this grant?**

Applications are assessed by the Grant Advisor, who will work directly with applicants throughout the application process to ensure the best opportunity is given to you for a successful proposal.

Only one assessment will be made of your proposal based on the information in your application and supporting documentation. An assessor from the team will recommend to the Vibrant Wiltshire Programme Manager and Economic Development Service Manager (i.e. the panel) if your proposal should be supported with grant or be rejected. Before concluding the assessment, if the assessor feels more information could positively support your proposal you will be requested to provide the information.

If it is not forthcoming without explanation your application will be rejected. If the assessor concludes that the application is not eligible or not aligned with scheme purpose and aims, prior to the recommendation of rejection is made to the panel, the assessor will contact you to see if there is anything further that can be added in support of the application. This may mean you have to make significant changes to your application.

The panel's decision on your application is final, and if your application is rejected, you will be informed it will not progress any further. Decisions made by the grant panel on applications to the scheme will be final.

There is no appeal process. However, if you feel the council has not treated any aspect of your application to the scheme with fairness, you are able to make complaints to [complaints@wiltshire.gov.uk](mailto:complaints@wiltshire.gov.uk) The council reserves the right to change the terms, conditions, and nature of this scheme at any time without notice – though we will endeavour to publicise the changes with revisions to this guidance. Grants are discretionary and subject to availability of funds.

A grant application that includes a building within an existing town centre does not give automatic entitlement to a grant.

Once the grant programme deadline is reached, the scheme will close to new applications.

### **Section 7 - Payment of grant claim**

Businesses will need to make a claim to receive the grant by providing proof of costs incurred (invoices) and payments for the works completed before any grant payment is made. The claim form is designed to help manage the information over interim claims if required. All costs must be invoiced or receipted and shown as paid out on a bank statement before reimbursement of grant. Following receipt of your grant claim the following checks will be made.

Where satisfactory, the grant will be paid directly to your account using BACS wherever possible. The key points of claim checks are:

- to ensure expenditure is consistent with proposal.
- to ensure expenditure is not in a non-eligible category.
- to record any discrepancies between proposal and expenditure and bring them to attention of the team for consideration of contract variation or breach.
- to check evidence and record achievements of scheme outputs, such as jobs created. The claim checking process is inexhaustive and may include requests for further evidence such as photograph or a site inspection when necessary.

The Council reserves the right to withhold grant payments if works are not completed within agreed timeframes. The council reserves the right to recover financial assistance in full or in part if the grant agreement conditions are breached. On satisfaction of the claim, the grant is paid by the council directly to the business (up to the amount claimed where interim claims are necessary).

Payment of grant Your grant will be paid in arrears following a satisfactory claim. This means:

- you will arrange for and then pay for works and items purchased for the project.
- you will make a claim showing the expenditure on standard form.
- Council officers will check to ensure that the expenditure is eligible under the scheme and fits with the scheme purpose.
- if satisfied, the Council will pay the grant. The council will offer all projects the ability to make 'interim' claims. This will help you manage the project's finances by receiving grant in stages, as you make a interim claims at staged intervals.

### **Section 8 - My application is dependent on having a lease, but there is no point to in obtaining 5 the lease without a grant.**

In most circumstances, we would expect you to have a lease or rental agreement for the time periods mentioned above, but to have not commenced trading or running any aspect of your business from this property. However, we also recognise the circumstances where you do not have a lease nor planning consent on a property, but on being awarded a grant you would be able to take up the lease. If this is the case, you will need to submit information such as heads of terms or correspondence on negotiations with a landlord that shows clear intent.



Similarly, you may not know the full amount of the investment until you pay for an architect or other professional to complete plans, but which you will not wish to do until a grant is confirmed. In this type of situation you should indicate this on the application form, and explain the background to your application in the email used to submit the application so that the assessor is aware of your situation. You can request help by explaining the issues in an email to [vibrant.wiltshire@wiltshire.gov.uk](mailto:vibrant.wiltshire@wiltshire.gov.uk) The grants panel can make a decision with conditions of funding, such as for completion of the lease agreement, full costing of works from a professional, or for other incomplete proposals which otherwise appear supportable. For build projects it is normal for costs to be confirmed after an initial decision on funding is made, and the council expects to work with applicants before, during and after making an application to ensure that conditions for awarding a grant are met and projects are well managed. Once you fulfil the conditions of funding, such as providing a signed lease or rental agreement, or proof of planning consent, the offer of grant award will be made.

### **Section 9 - If my application is successful what happens after I accept my grant award?**

If your grant application is successful, you will be offered a formal grant agreement which will set out general and specific terms and conditions relating to the grant. This agreement will be between you and Wiltshire Council. As you are offered the formal grant agreement, you will be contacted by the team to set-up the project with an initial project visit to go through paperwork and agree a claim schedule that is appropriate for your needs.

The team will be in contact with you to ensure progress is being made to bring the vacant property back into use. Towards the end of the project, you will be contacted by the team to ensure that you are able to realise the aims of the project. This final project inspection should confirm all project costs and plan any further engagement regarding monitoring progress and publicity. The timing will depend on the number of interim claims and contact there has been throughout the project investment period.

You may be asked by the team to publicise details of the grant and works that it has funded as part of the promotional activity for the scheme. This may include photographs of you, the applicant, internal and external photographs of the property, and quotes from you on how the grant scheme has supported your business.

The council is keen to measure impact of this programme. We will ask you to report on specific outputs that have been agreed from your proposal, such as if you think you will create any new employment, or to confirm the amount of space that has been improved.

We will ask you to report with your grant claim, and we may contact you at six monthly intervals for up to a maximum of three years to report progress. You may also be asked more broadly about the scheme and how it has helped your business as part of the council's evaluation of the programme.

### **Section 10 - I've read these guidance notes, how do I apply?**

Please complete an application form and investment budget which is found on the Wiltshire Council website at: [www.wiltshire.gov.uk/vibrant-wiltshire-grants](http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/vibrant-wiltshire-grants)

Please use this checklist to ensure that you make a full application to the VW scheme.

- Fully completed, dated application form.
- Fully completed investment budget spreadsheet.
- Where applicable, a copy of your lease or rental agreement with start and end date and the signatures of all parties.
- Written confirmation from your landlord that they consent to your proposed changes to the property.
- You have copies of the written quotes reported on the investment budget spreadsheet stored on your files and available on request.
- You have provided your latest set of business accounts with a profit and loss, or as a sole trader, you have provided your most recent tax return.
- In support of your application, please include a small number of photographs showing the interior and exterior parts of property that will be improved. Alternatively, or in addition, please support your application with any plans that show the space that will be improved. (If this information is available online as part of a planning application or consent, please indicate). Your application form and all necessary supporting information should be sent by email to Vibrant Wiltshire Programme:  
Vibrant.Wiltshire@wiltshire.gov.uk

### **Section 11 - Offers in Principle:**

We can confirm in writing if signing a lease or rental agreement on an eligible property would make you eligible for a grant award. Once you can provide proof of a signed lease or rental agreement, we can then confirm our offer with a formal Grant Offer Letter. Offers in principle secure the agreed amount of funding to your application for a maximum of 90 days from the date on our Letter of Offer In Principle. If you are unable to provide all necessary information within this period, or before the application deadline we may withdraw our offer at our discretion and reallocate the agreed funding to other applicants.

### **Help with your business**

As with this scheme, Wiltshire Council is keen to promote the local economy and support all local businesses to thrive. To find out what help is available please visit business support directory - Wiltshire Council and you can also sign-up for the Wiltshire Council business support newsletter at Business Newsletter Request If you need to take advice on trading standards please visit our Advice to business- pages. For information about local shopping and the offer in Trowbridge, please visit Trowbridge shop local directory - Wiltshire Council For the full range of support available you are also advised to visit <https://growthhub.swlep.co.uk/>.

### **Closing date**

For the closing date of the Vacant Commercial Units grants fund applications, please refer to the webpage.