

Voluntary & Community Sector Grants Protocol (2026)

(including Arts, Heritage, Culture & Social
Enterprises)



Dorset
Council

Purpose of Protocol

This protocol sets out the process and minimum standards for the distribution of competitive grant funding to applications that support one or more of Dorset Council's corporate objectives.

These grants are awarded to the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) through a formal application process and are funded directly by Dorset Council. Competitive grants form part of the Council's commissioning activity. The standards and procedures outlined in this protocol ensure that grant making is impartial, transparent and auditable, while delivering best value for public funds. They also support the Council to gather consistent and meaningful data on the impact of its investments.

In exceptional circumstances, it may be necessary to adjust these standards. Such adjustments may only be made with prior authorisation from the Member Portfolio Holder for Communities, and approval must be obtained before the fund is publicly advertised.

Out of scope of this Protocol

The following are not covered by this protocol:

- Dorset Council Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and Section 106 funds which have been devolved to Town and Parish Councils.
- Dorset Council non-competitive commissioned grants which are covered under the Procurement and Commissioning strategy and policy.
- Dorset Council grants to businesses or individuals that are not considered part of the voluntary community sector (VCS).
- Grants distributed on behalf of external agencies or Government departments where those schemes come with their own specified application processes or standardised forms.

Eligibility

Definition of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS)



For the purpose of Dorset Council grants, VCS organisations include:

- Registered Charities
- Social Enterprises (Companies limited by guarantee that have a clear not-for-profit clause in their governing document and clear charitable or social objectives aligned to the funding programme)
- Parish Councils (Town Councils may apply as part of a consortium)
- Faith groups and Churches (provided they are not promoting religious beliefs)
- Newly established groups that can meet the council's mandatory governance requirements (detailed later in this document)
- Constituted Community and Voluntary sector organisations
- Community Interest Companies (CIC) that are Limited by Guarantee and registered with the Office of the Regulator of CICs. (additional guidance in Appendix 1)

Minimum Governance Requirements

To be eligible the organisation must have:

- A management committee, Board of Trustees or Board of Directors with at least three unrelated people as members
- A written constitution or governing document that sets out the purpose and management of the organisation
- A bank account in the name of the organisation with at least two unrelated signatories required for payments
- An appropriate Safeguarding and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policies
- Additional governance requirements may apply depending on the funding level

Grant Categories

Dorset Council categorises VCS grants as either micro grants or grants. They are defined as the following:



- Micro grant – up to the value of £1,000
- Grant – value above £1,000

Exclusions

The following are not eligible for funding:

- Public bodies to carry out their statutory obligations
- The promotion of religious or political causes
- Retrospective funding (work already started or completed)
- Organisations proposing bursaries; 1:1 coaching or onwards grant-making using Council funds.
- Activities outside of the Dorset Council area (including the Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council area).
- Organisations holding excessive unrestricted funding (more than 12 months of operational costs)
- Medical research or feasibility studies
- Organisations previously funded but who have not completed required reporting.
- National charities unless their local branch is financially independent and locally managed.
- Educational establishments such as schools, colleges and Universities (unless friends of or PTA)
- Projects duplicating an existing commissioned service or provider in the same locality
- Salary or fees of professional fundraisers

Grant Application Process

- All fund details and full information will be published on the Dorset Council website
- Applications must be submitted via the online Case Viewer system
- Where applicants are unable to access the online form, a paper copy or digital support will be provided on request.



- Applications submitted after the published closing date will not be accepted.
- Dorset Council welcomes discussions with applicants about their project prior to submitting their application – details of how the applicant can contact an appropriate officer will be included in fund guidance.

Required Application Fields

- All application forms must include at least the following fields:

Organisational Information

- Organisation Name
- Organisation status (e.g. Registered charity)
- Organisation registration number (if applicable)
- Organisation registered address, telephone number, email address and website/social media
- Start date of the organisation
- Main contact name, position in the organisation, phone number and email address

Activity Information

- How much the applicant is applying for
- A summary of for the project or activity
- When the funded work / project will begin and end
- Which of Dorset Council's priorities will be addressed
- What are the expected outcomes and measurement approach

Thematic and Geographical Information

- Which geographical area within Dorset Council area will benefit
- Which disadvantaged groups will benefit

Financial Information

- Whether currently in receipt of Dorset Council funding
- Project cost breakdown
- Whether match funding is required, and the percentage of the overall project budget that must be provided (where applicable). To ensure



best value for public money, project based funds will normally require a financial contribution from fundraising activities (excluding in kind contributions). Each fund will determine and publish the minimum required percentage.

- Declaration that the application is true and correct, signature, date, position in organisation

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Applicants must demonstrate how their services or projects are inclusive and contribute to the delivery of Dorset Council's [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan 2024 to 2027 - Dorset Council](#)

Fund Guidance

- Each fund will publish clear guidance including:
- Opening and closing dates (where applicable)
- Panel assessment date
- Applicant notification date
- Total funds available
- Maximum and minimum grant amount
- Required alignment with [Dorset Council's priorities](#) - how many the applicant is expected to address – this should be relative to the grant amount available.
- Desired outcomes of the fund.
- Whether the fund is for Revenue or Capital applications
- Eligibility criteria
- Examples of what the fund may and will not consider
- Expected project start times following the fund award. For revenue projects this should be within 12 weeks following the award letter. For capital projects conditional of external match funding, this should be within 24 months following the award letter.
- Whether partial grant awards will be offered.
- Terms and conditions
- Appeal process



- Contact details for the officer/s for queries on the fund
- How to submit the application

Compliance & Supporting Documents

Dorset Council has a responsibility to take upmost care with public funds and therefore requires evidence of the following documents. Some funds may require additional documentation

Document	Micro grants	Grants	Why Do We Need It
Constitution/ Memorandum of Articles and Association	If appropriate	Yes	Demonstrates organisation's purpose and governance arrangements A management committee, Board of Trustees or Board of Directors with at least three unrelated people as members
Annual Accounts	No	Yes	These can be audited or independently examined accounts or an income/expenditure spreadsheet depending on the size of the organisation. Demonstrates the financial position of the organisation regarding income, expenditure, loans, liabilities etc. New organisations without annual accounts may submit a financial forecast as an alternative
Bank Statement	Yes*	Yes*	Shows the organisation has a bank account in their name with 2 unrelated signatories, and we can confirm bank account details. Important that it shows account name, sort code and account number clearly of applicant.



Safeguarding Policies / Equal Opportunities	If appropriate	Yes	Shows that the organisation has robust policies in place.
Environmental Policy or Statement	If appropriate	Yes	Shows the organisation considers how their work has an environment impact
Public Liability Insurance	If appropriate	£10,000,000	Shows the organisation has appropriate safeguards in place

** For new/emerging or micro-organisations who do not have their own bank account, Dorset Council recommends that their local Town or Parish Council act as the bank account holder. Dorset Council cannot pay into an individual's personal bank account.

Assessment process

- Initial assessment will always be carried out by more than one officer using a scoring matrix aligned to the fund's outcomes for transparency.
- Applications will only be assessed if submitted by the deadline via case viewer or via an approved paper copy by prior agreement.
- The award will be confirmed only after financial checks have been completed and the Panel is satisfied that the organisation has the resources to manage the project successfully
- The administering Officer will notify relevant Local Members and provide a summary of applications in their ward. Members will have 5 working days to provide comments, which will be included in the assessment documentation.
- Awards will only be made once all required supporting documentation and a signed grant agreement have been received.
- Each Assessment Panel will include at least two specialist Dorset Council Officers (one acting as Chair), the Portfolio Holder, and where possible at least one representative from an appropriate external partner organisation.



- Where a conflict of interest arises, the relevant Officer or representative will withdraw from the assessment; the declaration will be recorded.
- The Panel will assess applications against the fund criteria and use a scoring matrix to prioritise awards. Decisions are made by majority vote. Where no majority is reached, the Portfolio Holder will have the deciding vote. Panel decisions are final.
- An assessment summary of all eligible and shortlisted applications, including Officer recommendations, will be retained as the decision record.
- If an applicant withdraws after a decision is made, the Chair may, in consultation with Panel members, reallocate funding to another applicant.
- Any changes to an approved award due to new information or project changes will be considered by the Grants Awarding Officer/Manager and Panel Chair, in consultation with other Panel members where appropriate.

Communication of Award & Release of Funding

- Dorset Council will notify applicants of the outcome within 6 weeks of the fund closing date.
- If further information is required, additional time may be needed; applicants will be informed where this applies.
- Successful applicants will receive a grant offer letter and grant terms and conditions which must be signed and returned before the project may begin.
- Unsuccessful applicants will be notified via the case viewer
- Relevant Local Members will be informed of outcomes relating to applications in their ward.
- Awarded funds may be paid in one or more payments, dependant on the level and purpose of grant and the nature of the organisation.
- Grant payments will be via BACS payment upon receipt of a valid invoice from the applicant



Appeals, Complaints & Feedback Process

- Applicants whose bids are declined may request feedback.
- Dorset Council welcomes feedback on the application process to support continuous improvement.
- Complaints about the service or advice received may be made through Dorset Council's formal Complaints Procedure (available on the Council's website).

Monitoring & Evaluation

Dorset Council maintains a robust and consistent monitoring process which includes:

- Outcomes as agreed in the grant agreement
- Clear guidance on monitoring requirements, including potential data collection related to social impact, return on investment or community benefit (impact).
- A range of monitoring methods e.g. face to face, phone, virtual or survey
- Proportional monitoring aligned to grant size.
- A 'Designated Officer' being allocated for your project for the term of the grant
- Regular monitoring which will be at six monthly intervals followed by an end of project report. In some cases, where the level of investment and risk to the council is higher additional monitoring may be carried required
- Feedback from the 'Designated Officer' to the applicant where performance issues are identified,
- An expectation that organisations provide monitoring in line with agreed timescales.

Data Sharing and Promotion



- Dorset Council will promote successful grant awards on the Council website and relevant media
- Relevant Members will be informed of projects within their wards.
- Dorset Council may share basic application data with other local funders to support informed decision making, reduce duplication and ensure value for money.
- Dorset Council will ensure that applicants' data is safely stored and destroyed appropriately 6 months for unsuccessful and 6 years for successful applicants.

Community Interest Company (CIC) Requirements

Governance Requirements

- A minimum of three unrelated directors (not married, partners or close family)
- A conflict of interest policy with appropriate management of related party transactions
- A compulsory asset lock naming an appropriate asset locked body
- Assessment of Persons with Significant Control (PSC); concentrated control may be queried. Temporary founder control may be acceptable for new CICs with a plan to diversify governance.

Community Benefit

- Must have objectives that demonstrate clear and ongoing community benefit.

Business Model & Financial Standards

- Must have a sound business model in which at least 50% of income is earned through trading unless the CIC is under three years old or can demonstrate why this is not currently achievable.



- Salaries and benefits paid to directors must be reasonable and proportionate to both the work undertaken and the organisation's financial position.

Financial Documentation & Reporting

- CICs operating for one year or more must submit a CIC34 report with their accounts.
- CICs filing micro entity accounts must also provide a Trading Profit and Loss statement.
- New CICs (less than one year old) may provide financial forecasts or management accounts instead.

Business Planning

A business plan demonstrating trading activity and financial resilience is required where:

- the CIC is less than three years old, or
- the CIC is requesting core or overhead funding.

Agreed at:	Commercial Board
Meeting date:	23 June 2026
Corporate Sponsor:	Steve Ford, Assistant Chief Executive
Cabinet Member:	Cllr Matt Bell, Cabinet Member for Public Health, Prevention and Communities

