Learning Fund 2026

CATEGORY: Learning Fund

Information for Applicants

Learning Fund 2026/27

Guidance Notes

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Version Number	Author	Purpose/change	Date
1.0	Economic Development	Grant Guidance Document	26 February 2025

1.0 Introduction

The Learning Fund has been developed by the Labour Market Partnership (LMP) to enable residents to gain new skills and qualifications that will help them enter employment or enhance their employability and career prospects.

The Fund is open to those who are aged 16 and over (not in full-time education), residing in Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough and with a legal right to work in the UK.

These conditions should be read in conjunction with the Grant Funding Policy.

1.1 Purpose of Grant Programme

The Antrim and Newtownabbey Labour Market Partnership (LMP) programme is funded by the Department for Communities (DfC) and aims to address key challenges in the local labour market for residents and local employers. To do this it develops programmes and events designed to improve employability outcomes and labour market conditions.

This grant fund has been developed by the LMP in response to the current skills and labour market shortages faced by residents and businesses. It will therefore enable participants to gain new skills and qualifications to secure employment, or to progress in their current employment. Training must therefore be aligned to a job prospect or career progression opportunity i.e. Class 2 Driver to Class 1 Driver.

1.2 Level of Grant Award

The Learning Fund can provide 100% of the funding required, up to a maximum of £500 for training and £1,000 for an HGV or Coach Driving Licence as follows:

Category	Key notes / Purpose of application	Maximum award
Training course	Funding will cover the registration fees and associated costs of the training.	Up to £500
HGV/Coach Driving		Up to £1,000

If the training costs are more than £500 or £1,000 you will be asked how you will cover the additional cost. If this is not clear, your application may not be progressed.

All grant awards will be determined on the basis of merit and eligibility. There is a limited budget for this grant programme therefore it will be a competitive process, the LMP may therefore need to prioritize eligible applications based on the order in which they are received or the value for money they provide. The LMP reserves the right to reduce the amount of funding awarded if we do not consider that the amount applied for represents value for money or if there are insufficient funds available to meet the request.

1.3 General Principles

In line with the Council's Grant Funding Policy, the fundamental principles of this grant are:

Funding Award is based on evidenced need therefore applications must:

- Demonstrate how they meet the eligibility criteria, this is a competitive programme and grant awards will be determined based on merit.
- Have a clearly identified need i.e. the application addresses barriers which the individual faces with regard growth in their employability and career opportunities.

- Deliver outcomes which meet this need.
- Support residents to achieve new skills and qualification to secure employment or to progress in their career.
- Be completed in full, with supporting documentation uploaded in the relevant section. Applications that are not complete, do not provide detailed costs, or do not have supporting documentation may be contacted and asked to submit any missing information.
- Be from (or made on behalf of) individuals who reside within Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough.
- Be for training which will be undertaken by a credible, viable business with the capacity to deliver the training as stated.
- Be submitted online, via the Grant Manager System.
- Be for a course or qualification which cannot be funded elsewhere e.g. through local colleges, Skill Up, Council's Sport Bursaries for Coaches and Officials etc.
- Be submitted before the training take place - retrospective applications will not be considered.

All training, assessment and accreditation must be completed by Wednesday 17 March 2027. There is currently no provision for extending this deadline.

Accessibility

Information on all grant funding programmes will be publicly available through the Council's website and proactively promoted across Mailing Lists, Social Media channels and Borough Life. This will include:

- Guidance on completion of relevant grant application
- Grant Management System embedded into Council public facing platform with digital accessibility options available
- Centralised Grant Funding information on Council webpage
- Guidance notes for all individual grant streams
- Point of contact clearly communicated for relevant queries
- Annual Grants Funding calendar made available

We will strive to ensure the process is user friendly, transparent, and fully inclusive. If you require assistance with any element of this process or with completing the application form please contact the funding unit.

Accountability

The Council will always adhere to the Grant Funding policy and guidance criteria outlined within each grant funding programme.

- A clear decision-making process will be utilised, with clear rationale and demonstrable evidence to support funding decisions
- Decision making process will be robust and transparent
- Funding decisions will be approved through the Labour Market Partnership
- Unsuccessful Applicants will be entitled to receive feedback on their application
- An accessible Appeals process will be communicated as part of each grants call

1.4 Who can apply?

Individuals who are:

- Aged 16 and over and not in full-time education (if under 18 a parent or guardian must submit and accept on behalf of the candidate).
- Resident in the Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council area (evidence will be required e.g. utility/phone bill). This must be your main residence and not a 2nd home or holiday residence.
- Eligible to work in the UK.
- Looking to find employment or progress in your career.
- Currently unemployed, economically inactive or in employment

1.5 What can be funded?

Associated costs of training, upskilling, qualification and accreditation including:

- Teaching/training/assessment costs
- Awarding body costs and exam fees
- Training material costs
- Licencing costs
- For HGV/Coach Driving qualifications – associated costs relating to licence application fees, theory and practical exams.
- Up to £500 for training courses or up to £1,000 for a HGV/Coach driving course.

1.6 What cannot be funded?

This funding programme will not award grants to the following:

- Individuals whose address is outside Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough (this must be your primary residence and not a 2nd home or holiday residence).
- Anyone under the age of 16 (if under 18 a parent or guardian must submit and accept on behalf of the candidate).
- Individuals without a legal right to work in the UK.
- Courses that are either not accredited or industry recognised.
- Courses delivered by the current employer e.g. in house training provided by employees/managers. All training must be externally sourced.
- Recreational or personal training courses not wholly and exclusively linked to employment, e.g. driving lessons unless industry related e.g. HGV / Bus.
- A course or qualification that can be funded elsewhere through a different programme or funding source (e.g. Skill Up, Skills Focus, Invest NI, Jobs and Benefits Office). (Extenuating circumstances will be considered, e.g. if a course training location or class times etc are not suitable considering your work rota or caring responsibilities etc).
- A course that is deemed not to be value for money (market comparisons will be undertaken by the Assessment Panel). If deemed suitable, applicants may be encouraged to consider alternative lower cost courses of a similar nature.
- Courses taking place before December 2026. It is anticipated that applicants will hear in December 2026 of the outcome of their application. Courses **should not** be booked before receiving a Letter of Offer.
- Political Organisations.
- Any business or organisations where there are ethical or reputational considerations – e.g., gambling, money lending, adult entertainment, tobacco products or cannabis products not authorised as medicines, debt factoring, hire purchase financing; pyramid schemes; projects which have as their object the promotion of political or religious views; illegal or immoral activities.
- Any other business or organisations that the Council may from time to time deem to be ineligible.

Commented [JS1]: Need to stick in something about courses taking place before Letter of Offer date - i.e. don't be putting in an application for grant funding for a course happening on 13 November. Do we suggest telling them that courses should be booked in December? Also, do we tell them to only book courses AFTER they've accepted a Letter of Offer

- Costs which are not wholly and exclusively towards training, upskilling, qualification and accreditation activities.
- Retrospective expenditure where course fees, awarding body registration, and other services/items have already been obtained and paid.
- Applications received after the closing date as specified.
- Costs that are not auditable e.g., cash payments.
- Travel costs.
- Accommodation fees.
- Costs towards ongoing running costs (e.g., electricity, rent, rates, insurance etc.).
- Building costs, capital improvements or refurbishments of any property.
- On-going licence or membership fees, unless integral to the qualification.
- Loan repayments.
- Costs for purchase of ICT Equipment.
- Mobile assets e.g. bicycles, cars, vans, lorries, boats, trailers, horseboxes, diggers.
- Second-hand equipment including refurbished equipment.
- Costs towards banking charges and / or repayment of debt.
- Costs that can be claimed back from elsewhere e.g. VAT.
- Activities which are party-political in intention, use or presentation.
- Salary costs.
- Alcohol, gratuities, gifts and prizes.
- Purchase of stock for general trading purposes.
- Insurance costs.

2.0 How to answer the questions

2.1 Information about the applicant

This question gathers information about the applicant including contact details.

2.2 Project Proposal - Why have you applied to this Grant scheme?

This question gathers information on the skills/knowledge that will be obtained from receiving a grant

3.0 How we assess and score your application

A panel will evaluate eligible applications against the criteria. Applicants will be notified via email detailing the outcome of the application.

Each application will be considered on its own merits. To deliver the programme's aim and general principles, Applicants will need to demonstrate how their project meets the appropriate criteria. It is important to remember that the application will be assessed ONLY on the information provided in the application form and specifically in the box relating to the question asked. You MUST demonstrate how you meet the essential criteria as set out in these guidelines in the application.

3.1 Eligibility assessment

All applications must be submitted in full. Applications that are not complete will not be considered.

Applications received by Council will be logged and undergo eligibility checks. If eligibility information is missing at this point, you may be contacted and given 5 days

to submit the missing information. Failure to provide all necessary eligibility information and complete forms as required will mean your application will not go forward for assessment in the current funding call.

If you are not sure whether you meet the eligibility criteria, or you need more guidance on the application form, please contact the Funding Unit.

3.2 Assessment and scoring

All applications will be assessed using the pass/fail method. Applicants who meet the eligibility criteria may be recommended for funding, depending on the available funding.

There is a limited budget for this grant programme therefore it will be a competitive process, the LMP may therefore need to prioritize eligible applications based on the order in which they were received or the value for money they provide. The LMP reserves the right to reduce the amount of funding awarded if we do not consider that the amount applied for represents value for money or if there are insufficient funds available to meet the request.

3.3 What happens if an application is successful?

3.3.1 In the event of a successful application, the assessment panel will:
- conduct price checks to determine if the training provides value for money and
- check to ensure the training cannot be funded through other sources and
- check evidence of residence of Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough.

3.3.2 A Letter of Offer will be issued together with procurement guidance and details of the claim process.

3.3.3 All recipients of a Letter of Offer **must** attend a Letter of Offer Workshop and Grant Claim Workshop upon acceptance. Further details will be provided upon potential offer of grant aid.

3.3.4 The Letter of Offer must be signed and returned within 10 days, the Grant recipient must provide details of a designated bank account for all transactions relevant to the funding.

3.3.5 The Grant shall be used only for the purposes of the Project as defined by the Applicant in the application form or variations, which the Council has agreed to fund.

3.3.6 The Council reserves the right to withhold any or all of the payments and/or require the Grant Recipient to repay part or all of the Grant if Council deems there to be a substantial or material change in the nature, scale or timing of the Project, or if the Grant is used for purposes other than those specified in the application or agreed variations.

3.3.7 Grant payments will be **paid 50% up front and 50% following submission** and approval of completed Project Grant Claims. Claim forms must be supported by original receipts and supporting bank statements, completion/award certificates and completion of surveys. **Payment will be dependent upon fully acceptable documentation being in place to support the claim.**
If required, grants may be released upfront in full upon evidence and confirmation of course registration. This must be requested from grants team and payments will not be automatically made upfront.

3.3.8 Council will release funds after verification of satisfactory receipts and

evidence of payment i.e. bank statements. Claims must be for the items specified in the Letter of Offer. Items paid for in cash will not be reimbursed.

3.3.9 Payment will only be released to an individual bank account and that account must be the same as the details on the application and supporting documentation. **You are required to submit a Reporting form to be set up on the Council's system to receive payment. Recipients of Letters of Offers will be provided with further details on how to complete this.**

3.3.10 The Council reserves the right to terminate or suspend authorisation of Grant Payments and/or to withhold any or all the financial assistance should the Project not be delivered in line with this offer of Grant Aid.

3.3.11 To meet Council's audit requirements, when making a claim, applicants should retain copies of receipts and evidence of payments made in the form of Bank statements/credit cards.

Applicants will be required to provide evidence of course enrolment/completion/certificates/licences etc.

3.4 Monitoring and reporting

If you receive a grant, you will be in receipt of public funding and this must be accountable. Monitoring and reporting are an essential requirement.

If any information in the application, monitoring or supporting information is found to be untrue or misleading, we will withdraw any grant. If we have already paid part of a grant, you must repay it. This will have implications for any future applications or requests for funding. We may also review grants made to you in the past.

Monitoring Requirements

Individuals are expected to complete and provide the following as per the conditions of funding.

Participants are asked to **complete an Equality Monitoring Survey.**
Participants must complete a Baseline Project Survey, Completion Project Survey, and Follow Up Survey.

The questionnaires will be completed via the Grant Funding Manager. Links to these will be issued with Letters of Offers.

3.5 Marketing and Promotion

If appropriate, the Grant Recipient shall acknowledge the contribution made by the Labour Market Partnership, Department for Communities (DfC) and Council in all relevant publicity materials including brochures, leaflets, newspaper articles etc. The LMP/Council shall be entitled to publish details of the assistance at such times and in such manner as is necessary without further agreement from the Grant Recipient.

3.6 Breach of Letter of Offer and Claw-Back arrangements

If the Grant Purpose ceases to be carried out during the relevant Grant Period as a result of any act, omission or default on the part of the grant applicant, including any breach of the terms and conditions contained within the Letter of Offer, the Council will invoke clawback procedures to demand that the Applicant repays in part or full the Grant Funding awarded.

The Applicant will be considered in breach of their funding offer if the following apply – please note this list in not exhaustive: -

- They provide misleading or inaccurate information, by accident or deliberate during the application process
- At any time during the project act dishonestly or negligently causing directly or indirectly any detriment to the activity or bring into disrepute the reputation of the LMP/Council by association through funding award(s)
- The applicant funded is in receipt of duplicate funding from any other source for any element of the activity
- There is a change of purpose, benefit or recipient, either during the project or within a reasonable period after its completion
- Training is not completed

Any reported or identified breaches or potential breaches that cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of the Council will result in the grant award in part or in full being clawed back by the Council.

If funding is withdrawn or clawback procedures invoked the applicant will have no legal redress to have funding reinstated. The decision of Council in this case will be final.

3.7 What happens if an application is ineligible/unsuccessful?
If your application is ineligible/unsuccessful for funding, you will be notified via email. Feedback will be available on request.

3.8 Appeals procedure
An appeals procedure will be available to unsuccessful applicants. For further information please contact the officers detailed at the end of this document.

3.9 Fraud and Corruption
The Council is committed to the prevention and detection of fraud and the promotion of an anti-fraud culture.

The Council operates a zero-tolerance attitude to fraud and corruption, whether from internal or external sources. The Council requires individuals that it deals with, to act with honesty and integrity, to safeguard the public resources and to report all suspicions of fraud and corruption.

Every case of alleged or suspected fraud will be thoroughly investigated in accordance with the Anti-Fraud and Corruption Policy, and where appropriate, referred to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). The Council will also seek to recover any loss suffered because of fraud and if appropriate, will take civil, and/or disciplinary action.

The following relevant policies can be located on the Council website:

- Anti- Bribery Policy - April 2023
- Anti-Fraud and Corruption Policy - April 2023
- Financial Regulations – April 2024
- Fraud Response Plan - March 2023
- Raising Concerns Policy – November 2023

The Council reserves the right to disallow any other current, pending or future grant applications and claims submitted by an individual in respect of the financial year and to apply a moratorium on Council funding to any individual where fraudulent activity is identified within the current financial year and for at least 2 forthcoming financial years.

The Council will inform in writing the individual, where fraud is suspected or has been identified. In the case of a bursary where the recipient is underage of 18 years the parent/guardian will also be notified.

4.0 Application process

Call Number	Opens	Closes	Notification of outcome
3	2 November 2026	30 November 2026	January 27

Grant Information Sessions

Interested applicants should book a place at one the person/online Grant Information Sessions where officers will take individuals through the grant funding available as well as the new application forms and online process. For further information please visit Council's Grants and Funding webpage: https://antrimandnewtownabbey.gov.uk/residents/grants-funding/

Contact details:

For further information, please contact: E: fundingunit@antrimandnewtownabbey.gov.uk E: skills@antrimandnewtownabbey.gov.uk

T: 0300 123 1580

Additional Information for Applicants

a. **Publication of Data**
If your application is successful and your project is awarded funding, please note that the Council. LMP and Department for Communities (DfC) may publicise details of all financial support awarded/paid out to beneficiaries. This will include the name of the business, their postal town, their post code and the total amount of financial support received by the business.
Details of applications (successful and unsuccessful) will be submitted to Council, the LMP and DfC and business details will be published as part of the Council report, which are accessible to the public.

b. **Data Protection Act**
We will use the information you give us on the application form during assessment and for the life of any grant we award you to administer and analyse grants and for our own research.

We might use the data you provide for our own research. We recognise the need to maintain the confidentiality of vulnerable groups and their details will not be made public in any way, except as required by law.

c. **Freedom of Information Act**
The Freedom of Information Act 2000 gives members of the public the right to request any information that we hold, subject to certain exemption that may apply. This includes information received from third parties, such as, although not limited to, grant applicants, grant holders and contractors. If information is requested under the Freedom of Information Act, we will release it, subject to exemptions; although we may consult with you first. If you think that information you are providing may be exempt from release if requested, you should let us know when you apply. For further information please visit the Information Commissioner's Office at https://ico.org.uk/

d. **General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR)**
When you apply for Employee Upskilling, we will ask for some personal information because, for example, your personal email address or telephone number is used on the applicant organisation's behalf or details of employees trained through the Programme. When you provide this information, it is processed in adherence with the GDPR, Data Protection Act 2018 as well as the scheme's Terms and Conditions to enable us to communicate with you about the application.
We take care to ensure that any personal information supplied is dealt with in a way which complies with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation. This means that any personal information you supply will be processed principally for the purpose for which it has been provided.

For further details on your privacy see the Privacy Statement.

e. Learning Fund Privacy Notice

Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council is the data controller for personal information collected through the Learning Fund. This information will be used to process your application, administer the programme, make grant payments where applicable, and meet audit and funding requirements.

The information collected may include your name, business and contact details, property information, application details, supporting evidence, payment information and correspondence records. If your application is successful, we will also collect information and documentation required to administer and process your grant claim and payment. Relevant information and documentation relating to your application and any grant awarded will be held on the Council's Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and Flexi Grant Manager systems.

The lawful basis for processing your application and grant information is Article 6(1)(e) of the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) – the performance of a task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the Council.

Information collected may be shared with relevant Council departments, the Department for Communities, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, and the European Commission for the purposes of administering, monitoring, auditing and evaluating the programme.

You can choose to join the Council's Business Directory and receive information about relevant business support programmes, funding opportunities, events and other business opportunities. This is optional and will not affect your application. The lawful basis for this processing is Article 6(1)(a) of the UK GDPR – your consent. You can withdraw your consent or unsubscribe from these communications at any time.

Where personal information is transferred or processed outside the UK, appropriate safeguards will be in place in accordance with data protection legislation. All information may be subject to audit and will be held in accordance with the Council's retention and disposal schedule.

You have a number of rights in relation to your personal data. Further information is available from the Information Commissioner's Office: https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/uk-gdpr-guidance-and-resources/individual-rights/

If you have any concerns about how your personal data has been handled, please contact:

Data Protection Officer
Antrim Civic Centre, 50 Stiles Way, Antrim, BT41 2UB
T: 028 94 463113
E: DPO@antrimandnewtownabbey.gov.uk

If you are not satisfied with our response, you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).