Solent Freeport Business Growth Skills Grant
Applicant Guidance Notes

These applicant guidance notes are for businesses seeking support to upskill existing employees to unlock business growth.

Purpose of the Fund

This grant is designed to help SMEs in Solent Freeport priority sectors invest in the skills of existing employees where skills development will support business growth, innovation, increased productivity, market expansion, or job creation.

Who Can Apply?

- Small businesses (sole traders, partnerships and limited companies) with fewer than 50 employees operating in Advanced Manufacturing (including Maritime, Aerospace, Space, Digital and Life Sciences), Defence or Clean Energy.
- Businesses with their main trading address in the Solent: Eastleigh, Fareham, Gosport, Havant, Isle of Wight, New Forest, Portsmouth or Southampton **local authority areas.**
- Businesses who have been trading for at least 12 months.

Applicants must be able to demonstrate:

- Why the training would not happen without funding
- That the business is growth-focused but unable to prioritise training expenditure
- Skills gaps are limiting growth
- The training is linked to a specific business need

Example applicant scenario:
A business in the defence sector has identified a £500,000 growth opportunity but lacks the cashflow to upskill staff in quality assurance and project management, which are required to deliver the contract.

What Can Be Funded?

Technical training, leadership and management development, digital skills, engineering skills, quality and compliance training, project management, export and commercial skills, and other training linked directly to growth. This must be delivered by a registered training provider (you can check providers here Search for a training provider). Only direct training costs can be funded. A more comprehensive list is supplied below.

What Will Not Be Funded?

Mandatory statutory training, training already completed, equipment purchases, salaries, VAT that can be reclaimed, or activity unrelated to workforce development. Costs associated with travel, refreshments and accommodation will not be funded.

Available Funding

Grants of between **£500 and £5,000** are available. These are one-off grants and the funds available are limited.

Applicants are encouraged to request only the amount required to deliver their project, as funding requests will be assessed and awarded based on demonstrated need and value for money. This helps ensure funding is distributed fairly and supports as many businesses as possible.

Applications

Applications can be made here Business Growth Skills Grant - Solent Freeport

Applications from eligible businesses must be submitted between Monday 12 October and Friday 20 November 2026. Once the application window has closed all received applications will be assessed. If there are any funds remaining after this first phase, a second round will be opened.

How Applications Will Be Assessed

Applications will be assessed against business growth opportunity (40%), expected outcomes (25%), value for money (25%) and business need (10%). There is no requirement for match funding, but this will be looked upon favourably.

Evidence Required

Training quotation, course information, and any supporting evidence demonstrating the growth opportunity or skills gap. Latest accounts and cashflow forecasts are also required to be submitted with your application.

Each eligible applicant will be subject to financial due diligence checks on the business.

Monitoring Requirements

Successful applicants will be required to provide outcome information including number of employees trained, qualifications achieved, turnover growth, productivity improvements and jobs created or safeguarded, along with evidence of such outputs being achieved.

Grant Conditions

Businesses will need to commit to:

- Commencing training within six months of grant award
- Remaining operational in the Solent area for at least 12 months after grant award
- Providing outcome data at 6 and 12 months from completion of training

The grant will be paid on evidence of the business incurring training costs (e.g. invoice) and proof of payment. Confirmation of business bank account details (e.g. bank statement) will be required for reimbursement.

GDPR

Any personal data shared by the grant recipient with Solent Freeport c/o Portsmouth City Council will be processed in accordance with UK General Data Protection Regulations and related legislation as set out in Portsmouth City Council's data protection and privacy policies.

Subsidy Control Rules

The award of any grants by Solent Freeport c/o Portsmouth City Council to the recipients under a funding scheme is likely to involve the provisions of a subsidy for the purposes of the Subsidy Control Act 2022 (the "Act") and therefore must comply with the subsidy control rules set out in this Act and related legislation. It is the intention that Portsmouth City Council and the recipients under these funding scheme are to rely on the exemption for minimum financial assistance set out in the Act, which means the subsidy control rules will not apply to this funding, provided the value of the grant sits below the threshold (£315,000 over a period of three years) and certain procedural requirements are met.

Due to the value of the grants being awarded by Portsmouth City Council sitting below the threshold stated above, these grants will only be awarded where it satisfies the minimal financial assistance exemption. Portsmouth City Council would not be considering subsidies where minimal financial assistance does not apply.

Grant Process

1-Promote the grant scheme to eligible businesses within the Solent via press release, social media and local partners
2-Enquiries sent to info@solentfreeport.com, logged and followed up by the Economic Growth team
3-Applications submitted via online form, acknowledged and logged by the Economic Growth team
4-Assess applications against scheme criteria and inform applicants of the outcome (successful and unsuccessful)
5-Grant agreement produced and signed by both parties
6-Pay grant on receipt of invoice and evidentiary receipts
7-Monitoring to be undertaken as per individual grant scheme requirements
8-Updates on progress and outcomes reported to Freeport Board

Examples of Eligible Training

Technical Skills:

- Engineering
- Manufacturing technologies
- Automation and robotics
- Digital and software
- AI and data
- Cyber security
- Clean energy technologies
- Maritime technologies
- Defence standards and compliance

Leadership and Management:

- Supervisory skills
- Leadership
- Change management
- Coaching and mentoring
- Commercial management
- Innovation management
- Operational excellence

Specialist Business Skills:

- Project and Programme Management
- Export readiness

- Customs procedures
- Export documentation
- Supply chain management
- Quality systems
- Regulatory compliance
- Negotiation skills
- Contract management
- Tendering and bid writing
- Procurement

Business Management

- Business planning
- Resource planning
- Financial management for managers
- Risk management

Digital Skills and Technology Adoption

- Microsoft 365 productivity tools
- Power BI
- Data visualisation
- Digital collaboration tools
- CRM systems
- Digital process improvement
- Digital project implementation
- Technology adoption programmes

Emerging Technologies

- Digital twins
- Internet of Things (IoT)
- Smart manufacturing
- Robotics and automation
- Autonomous systems

Marketing Skills

- Digital marketing
- Content marketing
- Social media marketing
- SEO
- Marketing analytics
- Brand development