

Thriving in Nature Grant Fund – 2026 Guidance Document

Purpose

In 2026, we are excited to open a third round of Thriving in Nature grant funding, building on the principles and learning of the first two years, and going even further to enhance lives across Oxfordshire through connection with nature. Spending time in nature has numerous health benefits, from reducing stress to boosting confidence and self-esteem. The focus will be on improving health and wellbeing, and nurturing work opportunities, by supporting charitable organisations to unite people with nature.

With a proven track record and a known need for funding, OCF is strongly committed to this fund for the long term. The flexibility of the fund has enabled a growing emphasis on food and farming, and an emerging focus on “blue spaces” like our precious rivers.

Over the past two years, OCF has awarded over £744,000 in grants from the fund to 27 different organisations, with a focus on the smallest grassroots charities. In 2025, we awarded a total of £250,000 through 13 grants. It was a highly competitive round and we received 47 EOIs, of which 33 eligible organisations were invited for full application. Of the 29 applications then submitted, representing £697,130 of funds requested, 26 were rated good or outstanding across the three main areas of assessment: outcomes, beneficiaries and budget. 40% of the EOIs and 42% of those invited to submit full applications were new to us or had not been funded by us before.

Our approach

- We aim to award **£250k** and are offering **small and large grants**, including multi-year funding (further details below).
- We are allocating **at least 20%** to organisations with an annual income **under £50,000**, to support smaller and less established groups.
- We are committed to keeping the application process as clear, straightforward and accessible as possible.
- Successful groups will be asked to set their own outcomes and indicators to define what success looks like for their project and track progress.
- Successful groups will be supported by the OCF Grants Team, including face-to-face progress catch-ups and opportunities to share learning.
- We value collaboration and may suggest joined-up approaches where projects have shared aims or audiences.

We are keen to learn about the work groups are already doing and understand how this funding can help them to grow, develop or respond to local need. This could include supporting staffing and core costs, relieving specific pressure points, or testing and developing new ideas.

Desired outcomes

We are seeking grant proposals that deliver **one or more** of the following outcomes:

- Enhancing **mental or physical health and wellbeing** through engaging with and caring for nature, green and blue spaces and the rural environment, including agriculture.
- Boosting **skills, training and job opportunities** through engaging with and caring for nature, green and blue spaces, and the rural environment, including agriculture.
- Expanding **access to nature**, green and blue spaces and the rural environment for underrepresented groups.

Our definitions

- Nature: larger natural spaces *outside* of villages, towns and cities such as open countryside and woodlands.
- Green spaces: *controlled* often small natural spaces *within* villages, towns and cities such as parks, local nature reserves, community gardens and grassed areas.
- Blue spaces: water. This includes rivers, canals, lakes and wetlands.
- Agriculture: urban and rural farms, community food growing, including allotments.

Our commitment

We will provide multi-year funding for the most effective initiatives. We offer full support to applicants throughout the process via drop-in sessions and full guidance to make applying simpler.

We will make two levels of grants:

- Large grants between £10,001 and £50,000 to be paid over two years. To be eligible for a large grant a group's annual income should be between £50,001 - £500,000.
- Small grants of up to £10,000 to be paid over one year. To be eligible for a small grant a group's annual income should be under £50,000 per year.

Grants will be paid in advance on an agreed schedule and will be subject to light-touch annual review. This will include a short progress report and a conversation with a member of the OCF Grants Team.

We aim to keep monitoring and evaluation proportionate and meaningful, placing trust in organisations to define and evidence the difference their work makes.

We encourage applicants to consider how their proposed activities can support and protect the local environment. As part of our commitment to sustainability, we will be working with a local ecology expert to review all applications. This will help ensure that projects not only benefit people but also respect and enhance the natural spaces they engage with.

The process

We will run a **two-stage application process**:

1. **Expression of Interest (EOI)** – a short initial application [APPLY HERE](#)
2. **Detailed Application** – by invitation only, for groups that are a strong fit with the fund's priorities



Detailed Applications will be assessed by the OCF Grants Panel and independent assessors.

Eligibility

Organisations that received Thriving in Nature grants for 2024 or 2025 and remain active within their grant period are not eligible to apply for this round of funding.

Applicant organisations must have an income under £500,000 per year. Applications from a group of organisations with a collective income greater than £500,000 are welcomed, as long as the individual organisations each have incomes under £500,000.

At least 20% of grant funds are ring-fenced for grants of up to £10,000 total for organisations with an income under £50,000 per year.

Organisation type

You must be one of the following:

- Registered Charity
- Charitable Incorporated Organisation
- Charitable Company (Limited by Guarantee)
- Community Interest Company; or
- a Constituted but Unincorporated Club or Association (i.e. you have a constitution but are not one of the other entities listed above)

Applicants must have:

- Income under £500,000 (note, this is a lower income threshold than some of our other funds)
- At least one year of operation; if constituted for less than one year but active for longer, evidence should be provided. You must be already operating in Oxfordshire.
- A bank account in the organisation's own name with at least two unrelated signatories, open for three months or more
- At least three trustees/committee members/directors who are not related to each other
- At least three months' running costs in reserves (if there are more than 12 months' reserves, an explanation may be requested)
- Up-to-date accounts – annual accounts for the financial year ending 31st March 2025, plus management accounts or an income/expenditure document covering the last 12 months, as provided most recently to your trustees/directors or equivalent
- Up to date monitoring and reporting for any previous grants received from OCF

Successful organisations that are non-charities will be subject to grants being restricted to charitable purposes for public benefit, and a specific grant agreement with clear conditions and outcomes will be provided, and restrictions required.

To be eligible, non-charity social enterprises must provide a plan (in the Detailed Application stage) explaining how the organisation is or aims to be financially resilient with trading as a core part of its income. If we agree that plans are appropriate for the organisation's age and size, we can then consider applications for:



- i. Reasonable direct costs of services that address a new or unmet community need or which provide new ways of addressing issues.
- ii. Building the organisation's capacity to develop and run such services.
- iii. Equipment, land, and buildings in line with our rules on capital grants to non-charities in paragraph 4.6 of our Grants Policy

We have additional due diligence requirements for non-charity social enterprises which we will discuss with groups which progress to the Detailed Application stage. For example, requirements include:

- The organisation has at least three directors, most of whom are not paid employees
- Salaries and benefits for any paid directors are approved by most non-executive directors, and are fair considering their work and the organisation's finances

Eligible costs

Applications to the Thriving in Nature Fund can request funding in the following categories:

- **Project costs:** these are costs directly associated with the delivery of a project.
- **Core costs:** these are costs that keep your organisation running, such as salaries, rent, utilities, etc.
- **Capital costs:** these are costs related to any physical assets your organisation may need, such as IT equipment or premises.

- **The following costs are not eligible:**

- Contributions to general appeals or circulars
- Activities where the primary benefit is the advancement of religion
- Activities where the primary benefit is to enable a public body to conduct its statutory obligations
- Activities where the primary benefit is the advancement of animal welfare
- Activities which have already taken place
- Grant-making or equivalent gifts in kind by other organisations (although we can fund provision of necessary goods for a service e.g. food parcels or activity packs)
- Applications from privately owned and profit-distributing companies or partnerships.
- Costs that have already been incurred
- Changes to land/buildings that do not belong to the applicant
- Large-scale construction projects (including fixed structures e.g. playgrounds).

Note on Land Use: Please be aware that for any proposed activity involving land, the land must be owned by the organisation, or explicit consent must be obtained to adapt or use it for the purposes of the grant application.

Please see our [Grants Policy](#) for more information:

When submitting your budget, please include all the costs needed to run your project successfully. This may include staff time, a proportion of running costs that support delivery, training, and monitoring and evaluation. Including these costs helps ensure projects are properly resourced and can be delivered safely and to a high standard.



Timeline

Here are the application deadlines, but also dates for a variety of sessions with our Grants Team who will be able to provide guidance on the application process and answer any questions you may have:

- **12th May** - Round opens for submissions of Expressions of Interest (EOI)
- **20th May** - Online EOI advice session – 12.00-2pm. 15-minute bookings can be made with our Grants Team by emailing grants@oxfordshire.org
- **5th June** – EOI stage closes at midday
- **16th June** - Groups will be notified of the outcome of their EOI
- **17th June** – Groups successful in EOI stage open to submit Detailed Applications. Details to be provided
- **24th June** - Drop-in advice sessions for Detailed Applications. These will be offered at a range of times throughout the day with a choice of speaking online via Teams, over the phone or in person at our central Oxford office. Details will be provided to all groups who are eligible to submit a Detailed Application
- **15th July** – Detailed Application round closes at midday
- **25th August** – Groups receive notification of results
- **Payments made by end of September 2026**

Monitoring and evaluation

You will be asked in the detailed application form to define **outcomes** and **indicators** that are relevant to you and that you will be able to report on. This will help us analyse the potential impact of your application and, for successful applicants, it will go into the grant agreement. Please consider how you would collect information for reporting on these.

Outcomes: An outcome is the result or change caused by the funding, usually the benefits that individuals or groups receive from your activities. Eg: young people experience better mental health [by attending weekly sessions]. You will be asked in the detailed application form to set 1 - 3 outcomes you will deliver if you receive funding.

Indicators: For each outcome you should propose at least one indicator. An indicator is something measurable which can track whether your intended outcome has happened. Eg: the number of young people who report better mental health after 1 year of participation.

Madison Community Foundation has a useful explanation of this kind of measurement: <https://www.madisongives.org/nonprofits/measuring-outcomes>

You can see copies of our interim and end of grant monitoring forms here:

[Interim grant monitoring form](#)

[End of grant monitoring form](#)

Successful grantees will be invited to a celebration event in May 2027 to share their experiences, including on monitoring and evaluation.

