
SUPPORTING
THRIVING
HIGH STREETS AND
PLACES PROGRAMME

Funded by
Department for
Communities
www.communities-ni.gov.uk

Vacant Premises Internal Fit Out Grant

(for new businesses or expansion)

Guidance for Applicants

Applications open Tuesday 10 November 2026 and close Monday 07 December 2026.

Our Vision

Our vision is that Ards and North Down will be a Sustainable Borough.

The Big Plan (Community Plan) uses an outcomes-based approach and seeks to enable all people in Ards and North Down to:

➢ Fulfil their lifelong potential

➢ Enjoy good health and wellbeing

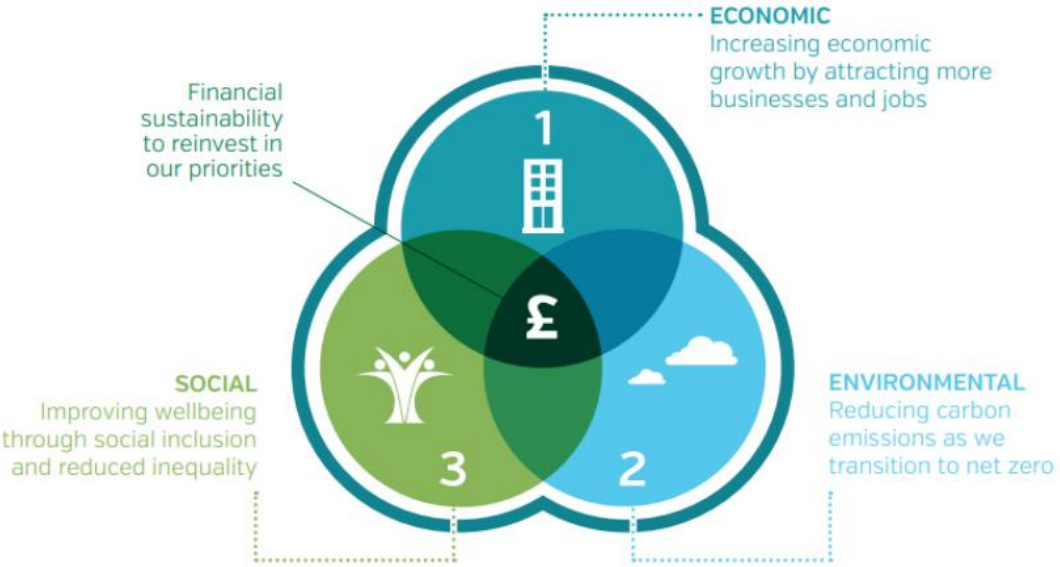
➢ Live in communities where they are respected, are safe and feel secure

➢ Benefit from a prosperous economy

➢ Feel pride from having access to a well-managed sustainable environment.

The Corporate Plan aligns with the Big Plan with a vision for the Council to become a Sustainable Borough by way of three pillars: Economic, Environmental and Social.

Three Corporate Priorities align with these pillars of sustainable development:



Further information about the Council can be found on the Council's website at www.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk

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Key Terms

- Ards and North Down Borough Council – “the Council”
- Department for Communities – “the Department”
- The new or expanding business named as tenant in the existing or proposed lease and applying for funding – “the Applicant”
- “Lease Commencement Date” means the date on which the lease takes legal effect.
- “Total Eligible Project Cost” means the total cost of items and works accepted by the Council as eligible before the grant is calculated.
- “Actively Trading” means trading with customers from the property, including in-person sales, collections, appointments or other commercial activity.
- “Expansion” means an existing business taking on additional vacant premises to increase its business activity while continuing to operate from its current premises. It does not include relocation where the business’s current premises would be closed or vacated.

Please read these guidance notes before you complete your application form. If you have any queries or wish to discuss your project with a member of the team please contact us fitoutgrant@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk

Your application and all supporting documentation should be sent to fitoutgrant@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk

1 Introduction

The Vacant Premises Internal Fit Out Grant (for new businesses or expansion) aims to bring vacant commercial properties back into productive use by supporting the internal fit-out works required to establish a new business or enable an existing business to expand into vacant premises.

The grant forms part of the Council's **Supporting Thriving High Streets AND Places Programme**, which aims to reduce commercial vacancy, encourage investment and support a diverse and sustainable mix of businesses in city and town centres.

Previously known as the Supporting Thriving High Streets Programme, the expanded programme maintains its focus on city and town centres while extending opportunities across the borough.

By helping new and expanding businesses occupy and fit out vacant premises, the scheme will contribute to more active frontages, increased footfall and vibrant, welcoming high streets across our city and town centres.

The Vacant Premises Internal Fit Out Grant is funded by the Department for Communities with contribution from the Council.

The grant will support internal fit-out of eligible vacant commercial properties within the areas identified in Appendix 1.

The scheme will provide up to 80% of the Total Eligible Project Cost, subject to a maximum grant award of £25,000 per property. The Applicant must meet the balance of the eligible costs and all ineligible or additional costs. The Total Eligible Project Cost must be at least £10,000 and no more than £50,000.

2 Eligibility

1. The Applicant must be establishing a new business or expanding an existing business into the premises for which funding is sought. The business can be a start-up retail, independents, Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SME's), social enterprise, leisure, hospitality or cultural.
   The property must be a vacant premises or vacant space within a premises, that is located within one of the eligible areas identified in Appendix 1. Applicants should check the relevant area map before applying.
2. An existing business may apply only where the vacant property will provide additional premises for genuine business expansion. The grant cannot be used to relocate an existing business from its current premises where this would result in those premises being closed or vacated, as this would displace rather than create business activity.
3. The vacant property must have been continuously vacant for at least three consecutive months immediately before the Lease Commencement Date. Evidence of both the vacancy period and Lease Commencement Date must be provided. Evidence may include rates records, dated marketing particulars, utility statements and a signed property owner or letting-agent declaration confirming the continuous vacancy period. The Lease Commencement Date should be evidenced by the signed lease, with supporting solicitor or agent

confirmation where necessary. Evidence must identify the property and collectively cover the full three-month period immediately before the lease commenced. The Council may request further information where the evidence is insufficient.

4. The Applicant must either have entered into a lease with a Lease Commencement Date no more than three calendar months before submitting the application, or provide written confirmation, supported by the property owner, that both parties agree to enter into the proposed lease if the application is provisionally selected for funding. Proposed terms must identify the premises, the Applicant as tenant, the commencement and expiry dates and any break clauses. The Applicant must not be Actively Trading from the property.
5. The proposed works must be capital improvements relating to the internal fit out of the vacant property. Please refer to Section 3 for further information.
6. Projects requiring planning consent are eligible only where the necessary consent for the proposed works and use has already been secured before application submission and evidence accompanies the application. Projects with planning consent outstanding at application are ineligible because of the scheme delivery timescales.
7. The application must be submitted by the new or expanding business that will occupy and trade from the property. The Applicant must be named as tenant in the existing or proposed lease. Where the lease is proposed, the signed lease naming the Applicant as tenant must be received before a Letter of Offer is issued, in accordance with Section 10.
8. At the date of the Letter of Offer, the Applicant must have at least 24 months remaining on the lease for the property. Any break clause or other provision that could end the Applicant's right to occupy the property within that 24-month period will be taken into account when assessing eligibility.
9. The property owner must provide written permission for the business to submit the application and undertake the proposed grant-funded works. This permission must be provided with the application.
10. The Applicant must not be Actively Trading from the property or specifically identified area for which funding is sought until all approved grant-funded works are complete, the Council has been notified and the completion inspection has taken place.
11. The Applicant named in the application, lease and Letter of Offer must remain the same throughout the process. The Applicant is responsible for procuring the works, paying suppliers and contractors, and receiving the grant payment.
12. The Total Eligible Project Cost must be at least £10,000 and no more than £50,000. The maximum grant award is £25,000 per property over the lifetime of the scheme.
13. The Applicant must contribute at least 20% of the Total Eligible Project Cost. Where the 80% grant calculation exceeds the £25,000 grant cap, the Applicant's contribution will be more than 20%.
14. Only one application per property is permitted over the lifetime of the scheme. Repeat applications will not be accepted.

Before applying, the Applicant should ensure that the existing or proposed lease will have at least 24 months remaining at the date of the Letter of Offer.

Vacant Areas within Partially Occupied Premises

The scheme prioritises the reactivation of ground-floor vacancies through the tie-break arrangements in Section 9. Ground-floor and upper-floor projects will otherwise be assessed using the same published criteria and scoring weights. No automatic additional marks will be awarded solely because a project is on the ground floor. Upper-floor-only proposals must demonstrate a meaningful and measurable contribution to street character and vibrancy.

Projects proposing to target upper floor units only will not be considered unless they can clearly demonstrate that the proposal will have a positive impact on the street character and vibrancy of a street or area.

Applications relating to a vacant area within an otherwise occupied commercial property, including vacant upper floors, may be eligible where the area is a clearly identifiable part of the building and has remained continuously vacant and unused for at least three consecutive months immediately before the Lease Commencement Date.

Applicants must demonstrate that the proposed works will bring the previously vacant floorspace into productive commercial use to establish a new business or support genuine expansion of an existing business, including the introduction of new commercial services or products or the creation of employment opportunities. The area must not be in use for storage, stockholding, back-office functions or any other active business purpose during the qualifying vacancy period or at the time of application.

Applicants must provide evidence identifying the vacant area and demonstrating that it meets the full three-month vacancy requirement. Evidence may include rates records, valuation assessments, tenancy agreements, utility records, dated photographs or other documentation acceptable to the Council. Evidence must relate specifically to the area for which funding is sought; records covering the building as a whole may require additional supporting information. The Council may request further evidence where necessary.

For applications under this subsection, references elsewhere in this guidance to the vacancy of the property and restrictions on Actively Trading apply to the clearly identified area for which funding is sought. Existing business activity elsewhere in the building may continue, but the Applicant must not commence trading from the grant-funded area until all approved grant-funded works are complete, the Council has been notified and the completion inspection has taken place. All other scheme eligibility requirements continue to apply.

Non Eligible Businesses

Non eligible businesses include (but are not limited to): Multinational corporations, betting/gambling shops, charity shops, adult shops, businesses or projects which are of a party-political nature, businesses or projects which promote a particular religion.

The Council will have ultimate discretion in determining the types of business/organisation that are eligible for grant funding assistance. This will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

3 Eligible Works

Only eligible capital items and works required for the internal fit-out of the vacant commercial property will be considered. Applicants must demonstrate how the project will enable a new business to commence trading or support an existing business to expand. The Applicant must not be Actively Trading from the property or specifically identified funded area until all approved grant-funded works are complete, the Council has been notified and the completion inspection has taken place.

- Bring a vacant commercial property back into productive use.
- Support the establishment of a new business or the expansion of an existing business.
- Create suitable, safe and functional internal business premises.
- Deliver a meaningful and measurable impact on the street character and vibrancy.

Examples of eligible capital items and works include:

- Internal partitions, ceilings, flooring and finishes.
- Electrical, lighting, plumbing, heating and ventilation works associated with the fit out.
- Internal counters, display units, shelving and other fixed fittings.
- Internal accessibility, welfare, kitchen or sanitary improvements required for the proposed business use.
- Decoration and preparation directly associated with the internal fit out.
- Fixed equipment integral to the operation of the premises, where approved as part of the project.
- Other internal capital works demonstrated to be necessary and proportionate to the fit out.

This list is not exhaustive. Other internal capital works or fixed items may be considered where they are demonstrated to be necessary for the fit out and operation of the new or expanding business.

All items and works must comply with applicable statutory requirements and have due regard to Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Applicants should consider sustainable fit-out methods, including energy-efficient systems, durable materials and the reuse of suitable existing fixtures and fittings.

The scheme is intended primarily for internal fit-out works. External works will be ineligible unless the Council confirms in writing that they are essential and incidental to the approved internal fit-out project. Where planning consent is required, it must already have been secured before application submission and evidence must accompany the application.

4 Statutory Consents

Projects requiring planning consent are eligible where the necessary consent for the proposed works and use has already been secured before application submission and evidence accompanies the application. Projects with planning consent outstanding at application will not be accepted because the scheme delivery timescales do not allow sufficient time to secure approval and complete the works by Friday 19 March 2027. Applicants are responsible for establishing before applying whether their proposed works or use require planning consent or any other statutory approval.

Applicants must comply with all statutory obligations associated with their capital proposals e.g. disability considerations, environmental health, licensing, building control etc.

The applicant business must obtain the property owner's written permission to submit the application and undertake the proposed grant-funded works. This permission must accompany the application, as set out in Section 2.

Applicants must provide a copy of the planning consent with the application where applicable. Where consent is not required, applicants must confirm this.

Applications for projects requiring planning consent that has not already been secured before application submission will be deemed ineligible.

The Council's assessment of an application does not constitute confirmation that planning consent or any other statutory approval is unnecessary. Applicants remain responsible for obtaining appropriate professional or statutory advice.

Any Letter of Offer for a project requiring a statutory approval other than planning consent will be conditional on the Applicant providing evidence that the approval has been granted. Any required planning consent must already have been secured before application submission, with evidence supplied with the application.

Alterations to buildings, internal layouts or entrances may require Building Control approval. Applicants should contact the Council's Building Control team for advice before applying.

The Applicant is responsible for obtaining all required approvals and providing copies to the Council. Applicants should allow sufficient time for approvals and submission of the final claim.

A claim for grant funding will only be paid when the relevant approvals are granted and evidence of this is provided.

A Letter of Offer may be issued before statutory approvals other than planning consent have been secured. Any approval required before works commence must be obtained and evidenced before the Council gives written authorisation to start. Relevant completion certificates and other final approval evidence must be provided before the associated grant claim can be paid. Any required planning consent must already have been secured before application submission, with evidence supplied with the application.

Note – Consultancy and statutory application fees for obtaining necessary approvals are not grant eligible under this scheme.

Relevant contacts:

Ards and North Down Borough Council Planning Department, 2 Church Street, Newtownards, BT23 4AP. Tel: 0300 013 3333. Email: planning@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk. Monday–Friday, 9.00am–3.00pm. Planning Applications Information.

Ards and North Down Borough Council Building Control Department, City Hall, The Castle, Bangor, BT20 4BT. Tel: 028 9120 8015. Email: buildingcontrol@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk. Monday–Thursday, 9.00am–5.00pm; Friday, 9.00am–4.45pm. Building Control.

Ards and North Down Borough Council Environmental Health Department, 2 Church Street, Newtownards, BT23 4AP. Tel: 0300 013 3333. Email: env.health@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk. Monday–Friday, 9.00am–5.00pm. Environmental Health - Ards and North Down Borough Council

During assessment, the Council may request written confirmation from Planning, Building Control or another relevant authority about whether approval is required. Applicants should make enquiries in writing and retain all correspondence.

5 Risk and Insurance

The Applicant is responsible for ensuring that appropriate public liability, employers' liability and any other relevant insurance cover is in place for the works. Contractors must also comply with all applicable health and safety obligations.

The Council and the Department do not and will not accept liability or responsibility in respect of any grant-aided work carried out at the property.

The Applicant and/or contractor is responsible for all risks in connection with public or employer liability associated with any works funded by a grant under the scheme.

An inspection by the Council/ or its representatives, or grant payment does not confirm or guarantee that a contractor has completed the works to an appropriate standard. Applicants are responsible for appointing competent contractors and satisfying themselves that the works have been completed safely and satisfactorily.

Ongoing and future inspection, maintenance or repair of any items purchased/ works completed under the scheme are the responsibility of the Applicant. The Council and the Department accepts no responsibility, financial or otherwise, for expenditure or liabilities arising out of any work carried out by or on behalf of an Applicant under the scheme. Any financial commitment incurred by the applicant which exceeds the amount of any approved grant, shall be the sole responsibility of the applicant.

A copy of all relevant and valid insurance certificates for the preferred contractor(s) must be submitted at the time of application with the supporting documentation.

6 Funding

The Total Eligible Project Cost must be at least £10,000 and no more than £50,000.

The grant will normally fund 80% of eligible costs, subject to a maximum award of £25,000.

The Applicant must contribute at least 20% and must meet any additional amount created by the £25,000 grant cap, together with all ineligible costs, cost increases and overspends.

The application value is based only on costs accepted by the Council as eligible. Applications with a Total Eligible Project Cost below £10,000 or above £50,000 will be ineligible.

Examples:

Total Eligible Project Cost	Grant Award	Applicant Contribution
£10,000	£8,000	£2,000
£25,000	£20,000	£5,000
£31,250	£25,000	£6,250
£50,000	£25,000	£25,000

The grant will **not** fund:

- Statutory application fees.
- Consultancy and professional fees, including solicitor, surveyor or architect fees.
- Insurance costs.
- Retrospective expenditure: goods ordered, deposits paid, contractors appointed or works started before the Council has issued a Letter of Offer, the Applicant has returned the signed Acceptance Form and the Council has confirmed in writing that works may commence.
- Recoverable VAT.
- Marketing and advertising.
- Costs already covered by other funding.

VAT may only be included where the applicant is not VAT registered and cannot recover it from HM Revenue and Customs.

This list is not exhaustive. For advice on whether an item or cost is eligible, contact fitoutgrant@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk.

7 Subsidy Control

All awards are subject to the Council establishing and documenting a lawful subsidy-control or State aid basis before a Letter of Offer is issued.

Under the UK Subsidy Control Act 2022 and Article 10 of the Windsor Framework (formerly the NI Protocol), public authorities must determine which subsidy regime applies to grant support.

Services-only businesses — UK Subsidy Control Act: Minimal Financial Assistance (MFA) If your business operates entirely in the services sector, does not manufacture or trade in goods with the EU and does not produce wholesale electricity, support is provided under MFA. The threshold is £315,000 over the elapsed part of the current financial year and the two preceding financial years. MFA cumulates with previous UK MFA, SPEI assistance or EU de minimis aid received during this period.

Businesses manufacturing or trading goods — EU State Aid: de minimis If your business manufactures or trades in physical goods that may be traded into the EU Single Market, support is granted as EU de minimis aid under Commission Regulation (EU) 2023/2831. An undertaking may receive up to €300,000 over a rolling three-year period across all public sector sources.

Applicants must complete Section 7.3 of the application form and disclose public financial assistance to the Applicant. The Council will determine which assistance counts towards the applicable limit.

8 Application

The application must be submitted by the new or expanding business that will occupy and trade from the property. To apply for the Vacant Premises Internal Fit Out Grant (for new businesses or expansion), the business must complete the application form and submit all supporting documentation, including the property owner's written permission, by the published closing date. The proposed-lease evidence arrangements below and in Section 10 apply.

Fully complete the application form and email with all supporting documentation to fitoutgrant@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk

IMPORTANT:

An application is complete for assessment when the completed application form and all application-stage supporting documentation have been received by the published closing deadline. For a proposed lease, written confirmation supported by the property owner, proposed terms and available vacancy evidence are required at application stage; the signed lease and final vacancy evidence may follow under Section 10 but must be received before a Letter of Offer is issued.

If the application is not completed in full, or required application-stage supporting documentation is not received by the closing deadline, the application will be treated as incomplete and ineligible. The signed lease and final vacancy evidence deferred under the proposed-lease route are subject to Section 10 instead.

The complete list of Supporting Documentation required can be found in the Application Checklist, Appendix 2.

9 Application Assessment

Assessment will take place only after the closing date of Monday 07 December 2026. The Council will first undertake an initial compliance check to confirm that each application is complete and meets the scheme eligibility requirements. Applications that are incomplete or ineligible will not proceed to scored assessment. Complete and eligible applications will be considered competitively by an Assessment Panel using the scoring matrix set out below.

1. The application is complete, includes all supporting documentation, and meets all scheme eligibility requirements.
2. Ability to achieve the works within the scheme timeframe.
3. The project does not require planning consent, or the necessary consent for the proposed works and use was secured before application submission and evidence has been supplied.
4. The Applicant is named as tenant in an existing lease commencing no more than three calendar months before application submission, or has provided written confirmation supported by the property owner agreeing to enter the proposed lease if provisionally selected for funding. The property owner's permission and application-stage vacancy evidence have been supplied, and the Applicant is not Actively Trading from the premises. For a proposed lease, the signed lease and final evidence of three consecutive months' vacancy immediately before commencement are pre-offer requirements under Section 10, not requirements for proceeding to scored assessment.
5. The lease will have at least 24 months remaining at the date of the Letter of Offer, taking account of any break clause or other provision affecting the Applicant's right to occupy the property.
6. The subsidy control declaration is complete.
7. The proposed works are eligible, necessary for the business use and represent value for money.
8. The project is deliverable within the scheme timetable.

The Assessment Panel will comprise at least three members. Panel members must declare any actual or potential conflict of interest and will take no part in assessing an affected application. Each application will be assessed consistently against the published criteria, with the panel agreeing a moderated score and recording the reasons for its decision.

Assessment criterion	What the Panel will consider	Maximum score
Strategic fit and scheme outcomes	How clearly the project will bring a vacant property back into productive use, establish a new business or support genuine expansion, and contribute to an active and sustainable city or town centre.	25
Need and additionality	The need for the proposed fit-out works, the extent to which grant support is necessary and the additional activity or investment that the	25

	project will create without displacing an existing business.	
Project quality and deliverability	The clarity and appropriateness of the proposed works, readiness to proceed, statutory considerations, identified risks and ability to complete the project within the scheme timetable.	25
Value for money	Whether the costs are reasonable, eligible and supported by comparable quotations, and whether the proposed outputs and benefits are proportionate to the amount of grant requested.	25
Total		**100**

Each criterion is scored from 0 to 5 using the scoring matrix below. The moderated score is multiplied by five to give a maximum of 25 points per criterion and 100 points overall.

Measure Score
5 - Excellent response that meets the requirement. Indicates an excellent response with detailed supporting evidence and no weaknesses.
4 - A good response that meets requirements with good supporting evidence and few weaknesses.
3 - The response generally meets the requirement but lacks sufficient detail to warrant a higher mark.
2 - A response with reservations. Lacks convincing detail to demonstrate that the proposed response will meet the requirement.
1 - An unacceptable response with serious reservations. Very limited detail to demonstrate that the proposed response will meet the requirement.
0 - Failed to submit a response to address the criteria and/or the response failed to meet the requirement.

The maximum unweighted score is 5 for each criterion; the maximum weighted score is 25.

Applications must achieve a minimum score of 50 out of 100 to be considered for funding. Achieving the minimum score does not guarantee an award. Eligible applications will be ranked by total score, subject to available budget and completion of required due diligence.

Where applications have the same total score and insufficient funding remains to support them all, priority will be determined in this order: the highest score for Strategic fit and scheme outcomes; the highest score for Project quality and deliverability; the highest score for Value for money; then a project bringing vacant ground-floor commercial space into productive use as part of the funded works. Merely providing access through an occupied ground floor does not meet this final priority.

If applications remain tied after all these steps, their order will be determined by a recorded random draw witnessed by at least two officers who have no conflict of interest. The assessment, tie-break results, draw where required and recommendations will be retained as part of the Council's decision-making record.

Incomplete applications will be rejected and the Applicant notified by email. Only one application per property is permitted over the lifetime of the scheme; repeat applications will not be accepted.

Funding is subject to the available budget and not guaranteed.

The Assessment Panel may request clarification by email. Applicants will have five working days from the date of the email to provide only the information specified. This process does not permit missing required application-stage documents to be submitted after the closing deadline. The separate pre-offer arrangements for a proposed lease remain subject to Section 10.

10 Letter of Offer

Following assessment, the Council may notify the Applicant that it has been provisionally selected for funding, subject to satisfactory lease evidence and any other required due diligence. Before a Letter of Offer is issued, the Council must receive a signed lease naming the Applicant as tenant and final evidence of the required three consecutive months' vacancy immediately before the Lease Commencement Date. At least 24 months must remain on the lease at the date of the Letter of Offer, taking account of any break clause or other provision affecting occupation. Applicants must supply this evidence within 10 working days of provisional notification, unless the Council agrees an extension in writing and the project remains deliverable within the scheme timetable. Provisional selection is not a Letter of Offer, does not guarantee an award and does not authorise works or expenditure.

The Applicant must not order goods, pay deposits, appoint a contractor or start any works until the Council has issued a Letter of Offer, the Applicant has returned the signed Acceptance Form and the Council has confirmed in writing that works may commence.

The Council will **not** retrospectively fund projects.

The Applicant must sign and return the Acceptance Form within seven working days of the date of the Letter of Offer. Failure to return it within this period may result in the offer being withdrawn.

Where planning consent is required, eligibility depends on it having been secured before application submission, with evidence supplied with the application.

11 Works Commence

The Council will confirm by email when works may commence after receiving the signed Acceptance Form and evidence of all approvals required before works start. The Applicant must retain this written confirmation. The Applicant must not be Actively Trading from the property or specifically identified funded area until all approved grant-funded works are complete, the Council has been notified and the completion inspection has taken place.

The Applicant must retain its right to occupy the funded property or area and retain the grant-funded improvements for the approved purpose throughout a 24-month

retention period beginning on the date of the Letter of Offer. The Applicant must notify the Council immediately if the lease ends early, the Applicant permanently ceases occupation or the funded improvements cease to be retained for the approved purpose.

For an early end to occupation during this retention period, the repayment will be the total grant paid multiplied by the number of months remaining in the 24-month period, divided by 24. Months remaining will be calculated as 24 minus the number of complete calendar months elapsed from the date of the Letter of Offer, with repayment rounded to the nearest penny. For example, after 12 complete months the repayment is 50% of the grant paid; after 18 complete months it is 25%. Before one complete month has elapsed, repayment is 100%.

A lease longer than 24 months does not extend this standard retention period. This proportionate calculation applies to early cessation of occupation only and does not restrict recovery required for ineligible expenditure, overpayment, misuse of funding or another breach of the Letter of Offer. The Letter of Offer must reproduce these retention and repayment terms. The Council will provide written reasons and its calculation when seeking repayment.

12 Works Complete

Works must be completed in accordance with the approved application, quotations and Letter of Offer. The Council's written approval must be obtained before any change to the approved works, costs or contractor is made. The grant may be reduced or withheld where eligible expenditure is lower than approved or where unauthorised changes are made.

All grant-funded works must be completed by Friday 19 March 2027. The Applicant must notify the Council when the works are complete so that the completion inspection can be arranged. Trading from the property or specifically identified funded area may commence only after all approved grant-funded works are complete, the Council has been notified and the completion inspection has taken place.

13 Payment

Grant funding may be paid in stages against agreed project milestones, subject to the terms of the Letter of Offer. The number, value and timing of stage payments will be agreed by the Council before works commence and will reflect the approved work programme and eligible project costs. The Council or its representatives will inspect the works before approving any stage payment.

All payments will be made in arrears. Before submitting a stage claim, the Applicant must have completed and paid in full for the approved works, goods or services included in that claim. Grant funding cannot be paid in advance or used to pay suppliers or contractors directly.

Each stage claim must be submitted using the required Claim Form and must relate only to completed, approved and eligible expenditure. The Council will normally make a validated stage payment by BACS within 28 days of receiving the completed claim and all required supporting evidence, including:

- Dated itemised invoices and receipts for the approved works and materials.
- Evidence of payment by cheque, BACS, bank transfer or debit card.
- Bank statements showing the transactions.
- After photographs showing the completed grant-funded works.
- Copies of all required statutory approvals and completion evidence.
- Completed monitoring and evaluation information and any other evidence required by the Letter of Offer.

The final claim must be submitted by the published claims deadline and will be subject to completion of all approved works, any required final inspection and receipt of the completed monitoring and evaluation information. The Council will reconcile total eligible expenditure across all stage claims. The total grant paid will not exceed the amount stated in the Letter of Offer and may be reduced where actual eligible expenditure is lower than approved. Any overpayment or payment relating to ineligible, incomplete or unsupported expenditure must be repaid to the Council.

Grant payment will be made by BACS to a bank account in the Applicant business's name.

Cash payments, including cash deposits, are not eligible and will not be reimbursed.

14 Procurement

Quotation thresholds apply separately to the value of each individual procurement package, not the Total Eligible Project Cost. An individual procurement package is the defined set of goods or works being procured together. Applicants must identify each package, its value and the corresponding specification and quotations.

Procurement Requirements:

Below £5,000	Seek at least two written comparable quotations
£5,000 to £30,000	Seek at least three written comparable quotations
£30,001 to £50,000	Seek at least four written comparable quotations

All suppliers and contractors invited to quote for an individual procurement package must receive the same written specification for that package. Quotations must be comparable within each package, and the proposed supplier or contractor must have the competence, capacity, insurance and health and safety arrangements needed to complete the works within the scheme timetable.

All quotations must be emailed with the completed application form and other application-stage supporting documents to fitoutgrant@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk and received by the published closing deadline. Only the signed lease and final vacancy evidence for a proposed lease may be deferred under Section 10.

Each quotation must be dated on or after Monday 09 November 2026 and include:

- Supplier or contractor name, address and contact details.
- A sufficiently detailed description of each item or work element.
- An itemised price, clearly stating whether VAT is applicable.
- The estimated delivery or completion period.

Where possible, quotes should be obtained from suppliers/ contractors within Ards and North Down.

The Applicant should retain every quotation received. Any actual or potential conflict of interest must be declared. The Council's written approval must be obtained before changing the approved specification, costs, supplier or contractor.

Where the required number of quotations cannot be obtained because of exceptional market circumstances, the Applicant must provide written evidence and a clear justification. Acceptance is not guaranteed.

You, or a business that you are the owner/ partner/ director of, are excluded from quoting.

15 Timescales

Applications open: Tuesday 10 November 2026.

Applications close: Monday 07 December 2026.

Grant notification: As soon as possible following assessment after the closing date and completion of required due diligence.

Final lease and vacancy evidence: Within 10 working days of provisional notification, unless an extension is agreed by the Council in writing and the project remains deliverable. All evidence must be received before a Letter of Offer is issued. Provisional notification is not a grant offer or permission to commence works or incur expenditure.

Acceptance Form: Within seven working days of the date of the Letter of Offer.

Final date for completion of all works: Friday 19 March 2027.

Final date for claims and evaluation: Friday 26 March 2027.

Applications and application-stage supporting documentation must be emailed together to fitoutgrant@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk and received by the published closing deadline. For a proposed lease, the signed lease and final vacancy evidence may follow within the timeframe in Section 10, but must be received before a Letter of Offer is issued.

Claims received after Friday 26 March 2027 will not be accepted.

16 Non-Eligible and Unsuccessful Applications

Non eligible applications:

- Incomplete or late applications, or repeat applications for a property for which an application has already been submitted under this scheme.
- Properties outside the eligible areas in Appendix 1.
- Properties not continuously vacant for at least three consecutive months immediately before the Lease Commencement Date.
- Applications not submitted by the business named as tenant in the existing or proposed lease, without the property owner's written permission, or without the required confirmation of agreement to enter a proposed lease if provisionally selected for funding. Existing leases commencing more than three calendar months before application submission are ineligible. A Letter of Offer cannot be issued without the signed lease and final vacancy evidence required by Section 10.
- Leases with less than 24 months remaining at the date of the Letter of Offer.
- Applicants that do not provide complete subsidy control information or would exceed the applicable limit.
- Applications from existing businesses seeking to relocate from current premises where the move would result in those premises being closed or vacated, rather than creating additional business activity.
- Applicants Actively Trading from the property or specifically identified funded area before all approved grant-funded works are complete, the Council has been notified and the completion inspection has taken place.
- Projects requiring planning consent that was not secured before application submission.
- Projects that do not meet the scheme aims, eligibility rules, funding thresholds or timetable.
- Projects where goods have been ordered, deposits paid, contractors appointed or works started before the Council has issued a Letter of Offer, the Applicant has returned the signed Acceptance Form and the Council has confirmed in writing that works may commence.
- Applicants who previously received Council funding that was not managed satisfactorily.
- Activities that promote a political party or religious viewpoint, are party-political, or are discriminatory.
- Activities that are not compliant with the Council's aims and objectives.
- Organisations not legally established in the UK.

Unsuccessful Applications:

Applicants will be notified by email where an application is incomplete, ineligible or unsuccessful, together with the reason for the decision. Only one application per property is permitted over the lifetime of the scheme; repeat applications will not be accepted. The review provision below remains available.

Applicants may request a review by contacting fitoutgrant@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk.

A review will consider whether the published guidance and processes were applied correctly.

17 Monitoring and Evaluation

The Applicant must provide monitoring information and complete the post-grant evaluation when submitting the final claim. The Council may request information about the property, business activity, jobs, investment and outcomes achieved.

Clear internal before photographs must be submitted with the application, and corresponding after photographs with the final claim.

The Council or its representatives will carry out a pre-award site visit and a completion inspection. Applicants must provide reasonable access.

18 Data Protection

Ards and North Down Borough Council values your right to privacy. The Council complies with the Data Protection Act 2018 and the UK General Data Protection Regulation. Personal information will be collected and processed fairly and lawfully, kept accurate and secure, and retained only for as long as necessary.

Information will be used to manage the grant, retained for seven years from the conclusion of the programme and then securely destroyed. It may be shared with statutory or regulatory bodies where necessary and legitimate.

For further information, see the Council's Privacy Statement or contact dataprotection@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk.

19 Marketing and Promotion

You must acknowledge the Department and Council's support by including logos on all printed materials associated with your programme of work. We will give you more information about logos etc if your application is successful.

Please get in touch in advance so that we can help you promote your project. If you are awarded funding, we may use details and photography of your project in council communications including case studies, media releases, social media, presentations and publications. Email us at fitoutgrant@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk if you have a query.

20 Contact Information

fitoutgrant@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk (Monday – Thursday 9am-5pm, Friday 9am-4.30pm)

Supporting Thriving High Streets AND Places - Ards and North Down Borough Council

Internal Fit Out Grant - Ards and North Down Borough Council

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