

Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP) Ltd



OxLEP Skills' Oxfordshire Social Contract Programme Marketing and Communications Support

Invitation to Tender

Tender headlines:

A 14-month, retained contract opportunity to work with OxLEP Skills promoting a key programme, delivering significant apprenticeship opportunities to communities and businesses across Oxfordshire.

A predominately business-to-business focused set of projects that will play a key role in generating new leads to OxLEP Skills' Social Contract programme.

An opportunity to build upon the positive engagement and outputs of an organisation playing a pivotal role linking business and education in Oxfordshire.

1. OxLEP background

The Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP) was launched in March 2011. We are one of 37 LEPs in England and we are responsible for championing and developing Oxfordshire's economy.

In recent years, we have made considerable progress in strengthening Oxfordshire's economy by establishing robust and effective relationships between businesses, academia and the public sector.

Recent achievements and milestones include:

- A total of £1 billion of investment has been secured to-date for Oxfordshire by OxLEP alongside key partners.
- Between April 2021 and March 2022, we provided over 6,000 hours of business support – valued at over £3,500,000 – with 388 jobs safeguarded or created through engagement with them.
- We provided £2.5m-plus worth of grants awarded to Oxfordshire businesses in 2021/2022.

- A total of 1,500 businesses or individuals were supported in 2021/2022 including providing apprenticeship support and guidance.
- A total of 1,294 businesses were triaged to the right support in 2021/2022.
- A total of 38 foreign direct investment projects were landed for Oxfordshire in 2021/2022, with the support of OxLEP.
- Since September 2022, there are 53 schools and colleges (including special schools) in the OxLEP/Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC) partnered Careers Hub.
- A total of 23 secondary schools and colleges have been supported to meet all eight Gatsby Benchmarks to deliver gold standard careers education and opportunities to young people.
- 100s of businesses have been engaged through the Oxfordshire Apprenticeship Awards since they were launched in 2017. This year's awards received the highest number of nominations and it is a key annual event for employers and apprentices alike.

Our vision is to see:

'Oxfordshire as a vibrant, sustainable, inclusive, world leading economy, driven by innovation, enterprise and research excellence.'

2. OxLEP today

Today – we continue to build-on a decade of success, championing the Oxfordshire economy and securing investment for the benefit of both our business community and wider Oxfordshire communities.

Our delivery is aligned with three operational areas of OxLEP, which are focused on:

- **OxLEP** (*Strategy, promotion of the Oxfordshire economy and delivery of major capital projects and programmes*)
- **OxLEP Skills** (*Promotion of apprenticeships, labour market information, linking business with education and young people all supported by stakeholders, including via the Careers Enterprise Company*)
- **OxLEP Business** (*Growth Hub for Oxfordshire and leading international trade and investment opportunities*)

This particular opportunity will focus on OxLEP Skills Hub and its Social Contract programme, though there maybe crossover with other departments within OxLEP.

It is worth being aware that the Chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, referred to a proposed closure of central government funding of Local Enterprise Partnerships in his spring statement.

We are currently in dialogue locally and nationally regarding our future role, though its important for you to know that – as a limited company – we have a secure budgetary horizon through to the end of the 2024/2025 financial year with a variety of other income streams that ensure we do not solely rely on central government funding.

3. The tender opportunity

Background on the Social Contract Programme:

The Social Contract programme was launched in Spring 2022, in response to the needs of Oxfordshire communities most affected by the Covid-19 pandemic; addressing some of the impacts on health and wellbeing related to unemployment or barriers to employment, education and training.

Access to good quality employment – supported by appropriate skills and training opportunities – are key elements that support improved health and well-being outcomes for individuals and families.

As Oxfordshire communities emerge from the pandemic and navigate through the cost-of-living challenges, it is critical for both individuals and families that there is access to good quality employment, supported by appropriate skills and training opportunities.

All of these elements are key in supporting improved health and wellbeing for individuals, for families, for communities and will help strengthen personal and community resilience.

Funding for the Social Contract programme was secured by OxLEP through the government's Contain Outbreak Management Fund, via Oxfordshire County Council.

Apprenticeships and the Apprenticeship Levy:

OxLEP Skills has identified the need to grow the numbers of apprenticeship starts and completions as a route to support people in good quality employment. Apprenticeships allow people to combine practical training in a paid job with study.

Apprenticeship Levy is an amount paid at a rate of 0.5% of an employer's annual pay bill of more than £3 million. We work with Levy paying businesses who would like to pledge up to 25% of their Levy to help grow apprenticeships in Oxfordshire, rather than the funding being returned to the Treasury. Many large businesses just see the Apprenticeship Levy as another 'tax' and do not utilise it or spend it on upskilling current staff.

OxLEP Skills estimates that there are 230 Levy-paying employers in Oxfordshire and only a small minority utilise the Levy fully, if at all.

We want to encourage and motivate more businesses to pledge underutilised funds and invest in the Oxfordshire skills landscape, create more new apprenticeships, and employ more local people in good quality, well paid jobs.

We know that businesses who employ apprentices use it to build a strong talent pipeline and a loyal workforce (for example – graduates usually remain in post for approximately 12 months, whereas an apprentice will remain loyal to an employer for three to five years, whilst in training often following continued internal progression routes with that employer).

Through the support of OxLEP Skills Hub's two Oxfordshire Apprenticeship Advisors, who make the process as simple and easy as possible for businesses (fully funded through the programme), we have already been very successful by unlocking over £700,000 of underutilised levy and generated a levy pipeline of a further £200,000.

Not all the pledged Levy has come from Oxfordshire businesses – some funds have been contributed through businesses outside of the county, who simply want it used effectively and do not have the support we offer in other geographical areas to do that.

By utilising the Levy, we have been able to work with businesses/organisations to create new apprenticeships across health, construction, business and early years sectors.

Further Social Contract activity:

The programme helps address various impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic related to unemployment or barriers to employment, education, and training and the impact these factors can have on health and wellbeing – for individuals, for communities and for businesses.

It is based on strong partner and community-based engagement, grounded in clear evidence from both the Oxfordshire Economic Recovery Plan and our quarterly Labour Market Intelligence (more information available in section 10).

The programme will also support:

- Young people who have experienced education disturbance and/or unemployment, or at risk of NEET.
- Improved social mobility for minority ethnic communities.
- Those furthest from the labour market including employment support for those identified as Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) and/or affected by the digital divide, food poverty or other socio-economic deprivation.
- The over-50s – aligned to the OxLIFE priority of the Oxfordshire Local Industrial Strategy

Anticipated impact of the Social Contract programme:

Upon completion of the Social Contract programme, we anticipate the following impacts to be positively felt by Oxfordshire businesses and communities, specifically focused on apprenticeships:

- We have a target to unlock £1.7million of unused Apprenticeship Levy by July 2024, supporting as many small to medium-sized enterprises as possible to benefit from apprenticeship programmes.
- To further support apprentice starts and completions through the programme's associated Oxfordshire Apprenticeship Grant Scheme, created by OxLEP Skills (delivered by OxLEP Business) – employers can apply for grants, on behalf of their apprentice to remove any barriers they might be experiencing. Funds have been used on computers, travel bursaries and driving lessons and range from £1,000 to £1,500 per grant.
- Further inspire and raise the profile of apprenticeships within our business community in Oxfordshire – this includes via our annual Oxfordshire Apprenticeship Awards which celebrates apprentices, employers, schools/colleges and individual training providers.

Required support from our procured agency:

Outlined below are the areas of delivery which the retained agreement will be expected to focus and deliver on.

Please note, this is not a conclusive list of tasks, but aims to give a broad understanding as to the type of focus anticipated – our required support may go beyond this list.

1 Raise awareness of Apprenticeship Levy underspend in Oxfordshire and support the creation of a pipeline of Levy payers and SMEs who are ready to benefit from Levy pledged funding.

Through a variety of campaigns across targeted communications channels and activity, help to generate a pipeline of interest across two main areas ensuring that Apprenticeship Levy is utilised in Oxfordshire.

These two areas being:

- Encouraging Oxfordshire based Levy-paying organisations to part with their Levy funding to support SME creation of apprenticeships, unlocking opportunities.
- Raising awareness of the positive benefits of apprenticeships within the Oxfordshire SME community, thus encouraging them to understand that

funding is available to support apprenticeship provision and registering an interest with OxLEP Skills to receive Levy funding.

2 Promote the Oxfordshire Apprenticeship Grant Scheme to applicable organisations and apprentices, generating a pipeline of interest.

Again – through targeted activity – generate a pipeline of potential recipients for the Oxfordshire Apprenticeship Grant Scheme, supporting the allocation of funds to Oxfordshire-based apprentices.

Activity should reach eligible candidates or businesses representing them. Grants will support apprentices to remove the barriers faced by them when looking to complete their respective apprenticeship qualifications.

Our chosen agency will be well-positioned to create strong awareness of the scheme and ensure that a healthy pipeline of potential grants recipients are generated through the activity.

3 Raising the profile of apprenticeships and the Oxfordshire Apprenticeship Awards, led by OxLEP Skills

Despite our efforts and the efforts of many partner organisations, some businesses – and young people – still do not see apprenticeships as a viable or valued option to them as an organisation or individually in comparison to academic pathways.

This retained agreement will see our chosen agency create regular, ongoing activity to positively position apprenticeships as the ‘first choice’ for businesses and young people, with the narrative helping to establish even more apprenticeship starts in Oxfordshire.

The Oxfordshire Apprenticeship Awards – led by OxLEP Skills – gives the opportunity to create positive narratives and helps to position OxLEP as a leader in understanding apprenticeships and their potential.

All activity should in-turn support:

- Engagement and warm leads with businesses in Oxfordshire who could benefit from OxLEP’s support.
- The ability to create engaging social media activity, in turn supporting organic (and possibly) paid growth of our audiences.
- Timely PR opportunities, aligned with programme milestones (for example – £1million worth of pledged levy spend), awareness weeks and/or days as well as responding to the external news agenda where appropriate.
- Regular activity to significantly increase traffic to our new OxLEP Skills website and help build an engaged audience.

Expected approach and KPIs:

We expect the recruited agency to be both:

- Collaborative in its approach (with both OxLEP Skills and our key partners), and:
- Possess the ability to show autonomy in developing projects and campaigns.

Once appointed, a comprehensive work plan for the retained period – with associated key performance indicators (KPIs) – will be produced in partnership between OxLEP Skills and the retained agency, supporting the direction of work during the retained period.

Evidence of previous success criteria and conversion rates with supporting KPIs would be encouraged with tender documents.

4. Project budget

As stated above, we intend this retained contract to span across two financial years (the remainder of 2023/24 and part of 2024/25). An overall, retained fee budget of **£24,950 (excluding VAT)** will be available for this contract's entirety.

This contract will run between 13 June 2023 (the earliest possible start date, subject to 'standstill period' – more in section six) and PROVISIONALLY, 1 August 2024 (this date will be confirmed, though please assume this is the contract end date for response purposes).

Please note – in addition to the retained agency fee budget, an additional activity budget line of between £8,000 to £10,000 (excluding VAT) will be available to our retained agency during the duration of the contract. The full amount will be confirmed upon appointment.

We would encourage you to break down this activity budget line further as part of your response.

5. Expected experience of recruited agency

Specific criteria, outlining the recruitment of the selected agency, can be found in section seven. However – broadly-speaking – we would hope to attract responses from agencies who clearly demonstrate the following characteristics:

- Those with a significant reach into local, national and international influential representatives that are specific to this brief.
- Those with a strong experience of B2B communications.
- Those with a strong understanding as to what creates effective and engaging digital communications, particularly when engaging a business audience.

- Those with a strong understanding of Oxfordshire, the Oxfordshire economy, Oxfordshire’s labour market, apprenticeships and Oxfordshire communities.
- Those with experience of working with MPs, central government, other government departments and local government.
- Those with a strong understanding of the role of Local Enterprise Partnerships.
- Those with evidence of successful conversion rates in previous campaigns.

6. Tender process

The table below outlines key dates relating to the tendering process. We aim to have commissioned this project to a preferred agency **by Tuesday 30 May 2023** with interested agencies submitting tender response documents by: **Wednesday 24 May 2023 (5pm)**.

Key dates are as follows:

2 May	Tender document launched on OxLEP website and OxLEP Skills website and promoted accordingly.
10 May 12.30pm – 1pm	Supplier briefing with Sally Andreou, Skills Hub Manager and Rob Panting, Communications Manager.
22 May at 5pm	Last opportunity to register questions relating to the tender with OxLEP.
24 May at 5pm	Closing date for tender responses.
30 May at 5pm	All agencies who responded to be notified of success/non-success of tender response – the aim is to appoint an agency to the project at this stage.
w/b 5 June	Should we be unable to appoint an agency based on tender responses alone, this week will be allocated for potential face-to-face interviews between agencies and in-house OxLEP team.
Until 13 June *	A 10 day ‘standstill period’ ends – more details below.

Please note:

**After we inform agencies of the result, a ‘standstill period’ of at least 10 days will be triggered. This process is designed to allow time for any bidder who is dissatisfied with the bidding process to act. Following this period, a contract will be issued to the winning agency.*

7. Selection process, appraisal and scoring

All submitted proposals (and possible interview process) for shortlisted agencies will be scored against a pre-determined criterion, outlining OxLEP Skills’ requirements from a partner agency.

Proposals should include information that outlines the following details:

- Demonstrable understanding of the potential scope for a retainer agreement and alignment with narrative.
- A clear proposal and outline as to how the proposed brief could be met.
- Full budget breakdown, including breakdown of retained fee and budget provisionally allocated for activity.
- Number of hours covered by retainer fee (or appropriate time metric).
- Details and credentials (skills/experience) of who would work on the account.
- Evidence of work in a similar field(s) where possible.
- Distinctive methods of communication to reach target audiences.

The scoring criteria will be as follows:

Area of scoring	Further detail	Percentage of overall score
Competency	<p>It is our aim to employ an agency that demonstrates competence against the brief and also demonstrates a clear understanding of OxLEP's role, OxLEP Skills and our Social Contract programme.</p> <p>We would particularly invite you to share past experience(s) with us that relate strongly to OxLEP's work and how OxLEP Skills activity can create a positive legacy with stakeholders.</p>	40% (0/40)
Creativity	Bringing OxLEP Skills' positive interventions to life for identified stakeholders should form an important part of your pitch. We invite agencies to demonstrate their creativity as part of their response.	30% (0/30)

Personality	Working with an agency, matching our team's enthusiasm and positivity is key to ensuring a strong, long-lasting relationship during the duration of the Social Contract Programme. Please ensure that your agency's personality comes across strongly in your response.	15% (0/15)
Price	Demonstrating good value for money benchmarked against similar agency support and outlining an expected return on an investment (though not necessarily financial) will also be considered as part of your pitch.	15% (0/15)
		Total score: (out of 100)

All responses issued by agencies will be reviewed by the following OxLEP representatives, all of which will score the responses based on the above scoring criteria:

- OxLEP Skills Hub Manager
- OxLEP Skills Deputy Hub Manager
- OxLEP Communications Manager **

Please note:

***The OxLEP Communications Manager is likely to be on paternity leave from mid-May for two weeks. A confirmed date for this is not yet available, however – should they not be able to take part in the process, a colleague from the OxLEP communications team will stand-in to review submitted responses.*

8. Working arrangements

The retainer will be managed by the OxLEP Skills team, with support from OxLEP's central communications team – a designated day-to-day first point of contact for the agency will be confirmed in due course.

9. Bidding, FAQs and further information

Bidding process:

All tender submissions must be received by OxLEP by **Wednesday 24 May** at **5pm** – please note, all late submissions will STRICTLY not be considered.

Completed tender responses should be emailed to the following two OxLEP email addresses:

- **skills@oxfordshirelep.com**
- **comms.oxlep@oxfordshirelep.com**

Please state '**Social Contract programme marketing and communications tender response**' in any email correspondence.

FAQs and supplier briefing:

Agencies are welcome to contact OxLEP for a discussion regarding the project prior to the submission deadline.

Please contact: Rob Panting – Communications Manager at OxLEP – via: **07919 352924** or email: **robert.panting@oxfordshirelep.com** for an informal discussion.

We will also be holding a supplier webinar briefing on **10 May between 12.30pm and 1pm** for agencies to ask questions regarding this tender. If you would like to attend, please email: **comms.oxlep@oxfordshirelep.com** no later than **4pm** on **9 May** to register your attendance. This meeting will be held over MS Teams and not in-person.

To ensure equal treatment – where clarification is sought on anything in relation to this tender document – we will promptly make the information available to all potential bidders too through a set of FAQs.

A set of updated FAQs will be regularly uploaded to the 'News' section of the OxLEP website – please continue to review our website at **www.oxfordshirelep.com/news**.

No further queries regarding this tender opportunity will be permitted – either via phone or email – **after 5pm** on **22 May**.

A final updated set of FAQs will be updated and posted to the above link by **12 noon** on **23 May**.

10. Suggested further reading material:

Detailed below are a number of additional reading materials we suggest you consider reviewing prior to your submission:

The Social Contract programme:

<https://www.oxfordshirelep.com/socialcontract>

Labour Market Information:

<https://oxlepskills.co.uk/employers/labour-market-information/>

OxLEP Skills: Local Skills Report and Plan 2022:

<https://www.oxfordshirelep.com/sites/default/files/uploads/8724%20Local%20Skills%20Report%20%26%20Plan%20v2%20final.pdf>

OxLEP 2022 Local Skills Report and Plan Executive Summary:

<https://www.oxfordshirelep.com/sites/default/files/uploads/OxLEPLSRPExecutiveSummary.pdf>

The Oxfordshire Economic Recovery Plan:

https://www.oxfordshirelep.com/sites/default/files/uploads/Oxfordshire%20ERP%20Action%20Plan%20-%20FINAL%20%2826th%20February%202021%29_0.pdf

The Oxfordshire Apprenticeship Awards:

<https://www.oxfordshirelep.com/oaawards2023>

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