Sovereign AI Visa Reimbursement Scheme

Overview

The Sovereign AI Visa Fee Reimbursement Scheme reimburses visa-related fees for international hires into UK-based research and development (R&D) roles for AI companies supported by the Sovereign AI Fund. It is one part of Sovereign AI's integrated offer for AI startups.

Most reimbursements are reserved for portfolio companies which have received Sovereign AI equity investment. A small allocation is also available to companies which have already received other support via Sovereign AI (e.g. via Strategic Assets grants, compute or R&D procurement contracts), but which may not have had the opportunity to receive equity investment.

Companies which have not received support from Sovereign AI are not eligible for this scheme, but are welcome to apply to the Strategic Assets, Compute or R&D Procurement Schemes here. Companies may also be eligible for the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade (BIST) Visa Reimbursement Scheme for Scale-Ups. However companies should note they cannot claim reimbursement from both schemes at once.

Please direct any clarification questions to the mailbox: visas@sovereignai.gov.uk

Portfolio route

To apply, Sovereign AI portfolio companies must confirm their status and consent to scheme conditions here.

They will then be invited to submit claims via the FlexiGrant portal for up to 10 international hires in qualifying R&D roles. A reimbursement claim can only be made after the relevant visa has been granted, eligible fees have been paid, and the worker has started in an eligible UK-based R&D role.

Hires must have started in-post on or after the date on which the agreement governing the Sovereign AI Fund's investment into the Grant Recipient has been legally executed by all parties, but before 31 March 2030.

Non-portfolio route

The Visa Reimbursement Scheme also supports some companies which have received other support from Sovereign AI (either compute, strategic assets grants or procurement contracts) but may not have had the opportunity to seek or receive equity investment. Eligible companies will be able to claim fee reimbursements for up to 5 hires into eligible R&D roles on or after the earliest applicable date on which:

- for support under the Compute Scheme, UKRI confirms in writing that the Grant Recipient has completed onboarding and its compute allocation has been confirmed
- for support under the Strategic Assets Scheme, the applicable grant funding agreement has been signed by all parties;
- for support under the R&D Procurement Scheme, the applicable contract has been signed by all parties.

up to 31 March 2030.

To apply, companies must submit an initial application that will be used to assess company alignment with the scheme's criteria, and consent to the scheme conditions here. For non-portfolio companies, the application will require additional information to assess alignment with the eligibility criteria set out below. If assessed as eligible, companies may then submit reimbursement claims via FlexiGrant.

Applicants will be assessed on a rolling basis with selection assessed on the criteria below.

- Active UK R&D - The company should have a defined R&D programme underway in the UK, or imminently starting, that international hire(s) would materially advance.

- Focus area alignment: There should be strong alignment of R&D activities with a current Sovereign AI focus area.

- UK base - A company should be strongly anchored in the UK. Relevant factors include: company domicile and legal jurisdiction, headquarters, founder and c-suite location, UK-based technical or R&D headcount, location of core R&D activity, expected UK tax and ecosystem contribution, and stated intentions on UK operations.

- Strategic potential - A company must have a technically sound product with a credible path to becoming a significant player globally in its domain, supported by a defensible competitive position.

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For each criterion, companies will be assessed using the following scale:

Score	Label	General Standard
1	*Not evidenced*	Fails to meet requirements; little or no relevant evidence provided.
2	*Weak*	Limited evidence provided. Does not meet requirements. Obvious gaps, weaknesses, or uncertainties present.
3	*Below threshold*	Shows some merit, but does not meet the standard required for funding; important limitations, uncertainties or weaknesses remain
4	*Strong*	Meets the standard required for funding; credible evidence with limited weaknesses / manageable risk
5	*Excellent*	Exceeds the standard required for funding; highly credible, well evidenced and compelling, with very limited weaknesses or risks

Candidates must score 4 or higher on every criterion in order for their application to be considered.

We aim to issue decisions on company eligibility within 5 working days of receipt. Once a company is assessed as eligible, and a Grant Funding Agreement has been signed, separate claims may then be submitted via FlexiGrant.

Reimbursement claims must be made after the relevant visa has been granted, eligible fees have been paid, and the worker has started in the eligible UK-based R&D role. Hires must be in post at the point of claim submission. The final date for claim submission is 31 March 2030.

What we will reimburse

We will reimburse the following fees for eligible hires:

- Certificate of Sponsorship fee
- Visa application fee on eligible routes (Skilled Worker, Scale-up Worker, Global Talent, Graduate, High Potential Individual, Innovator Founder)
- Immigration Health Surcharge
- Immigration Skills Charge
- Priority and super priority processing fees (if used)

What we won't reimburse:

- Sponsor licence fees
- Dependant visa fees and other related dependant costs
- Fees relating to non-R&D roles
- Immigration adviser fees
- Legal fees

- Recruitment fees
- Relocation costs
- Salary, bonus, pension, national insurance or other employment costs
- Travel or accommodation costs
- Costs of unsuccessful visa applications
- Costs not incurred by the grant claimant
- Costs reimbursed or funded by another public authority or Third Party
- Costs incurred outside the Funding Period
- Input VAT reclaimable from HMRC
- Capital expenditure
- Acquisition, improvement, depreciation, amortisation or impairment of Assets

Eligible R&D Roles

A hire must be recruited into an R&D role based primarily in the UK where:

(a) the role directly supports a company's R&D activity in the United Kingdom
(b) a significant proportion of the role is essential to the delivery of a company's R&D activities
(c) the role is a specialist technical or R&D role, including engineering, research, scientific, technical architecture, safety research or similar specialist technical roles
(d) the individual has been granted an eligible UK visa route
(e) the individual is in post in that UK-based R&D role.

R&D activity should be novel, creative, uncertain in outcome, systematically performed and capable of leading to reproducible results.

Retention

Where a reimbursement has been paid, the relevant hire must remain in an Eligible R&D Role for 12 months from their start date. During this period, they must remain employed or engaged by the grant recipient, work primarily in the UK, and continue to perform a qualifying R&D role.

The grant recipient must notify us if the hire does not start, leaves, relocates outside the UK as their primary work location, has their visa withdrawn or moves into a non-qualifying role during the retention period. These circumstances may trigger repayment under the clawback provisions. A promotion or change in job title will not itself trigger repayment, provided the role remains a qualifying UK-based R&D role.

Subsidy Control

The Grant will be awarded as Minimal Financial Assistance under section 36 of the Subsidy Control Act 2022. This states that no enterprise or group of enterprises under common control can receive more than £315,000 of MFA subsidy from any source or for any purpose within a three-year period. This includes the elapsed part of the current financial year and the two preceding financial years. If a company has already received Minimum Financial Assistance and reimbursement would take them above the £315,000 limit then they will be ineligible to claim a reimbursement grant.

Conditions

We will treat information provided by applicants as confidential except where disclosure is necessary for assessment, due diligence, approval, grant administration, audit, monitoring or related government functions, or where required by law (including the Freedom of Information Act 2000). Commercially sensitive material that you clearly identify and justify will be treated as confidential and not disclosed except where legally required.

If your application is successful, BIST will publish your organisation's name and the amount of funding awarded, in line with standard transparency requirements.

BIST will process personal data in accordance with UK data protection legislation, for the purposes of assessing applications, conducting due diligence, administering grants, and for audit, monitoring and evaluation. Personal data may be shared with the Home Office, UKVI, the Department for Business and Trade, other government departments and relevant public bodies where necessary for these purposes.

Submitting an application does not constitute an entitlement to funding or create any contractual obligation on the part of BIST. BIST may reject non-compliant applications, disqualify applicants where material risks or conflicts of interest cannot be managed, or decide not to make any award. BIST will not be liable for costs incurred by applicants in connection with this scheme. Applicants are responsible for declaring any actual or potential conflicts of interest.

This guidance does not allow one application to be used across multiple schemes. To be considered for another Sovereign AI or Government scheme, including the Strategic Assets Programme or the R&D Procurement scheme, you must apply separately.