

CoSTAR National Lab call: Grass Roots Music Venue Innovation In collaboration with MusicFutures, Liverpool Supported by the Music Venue Trust

TIMELINE:

- **Opening Date for Applications: Tuesday 15 July 2025**
- **Closing Date for Applications: Tuesday 26 August 2025, 12.00 GMT**
- **Application Outcome:** You will be informed in writing of the outcome within 8 weeks of the closing date unless notified otherwise. In the event of very high application volumes, this timeframe may be extended.
- **Project Start and Duration:** Projects are expected to start no earlier than Monday 3 November 2025 and end no later than Friday 27 February 2026

SYNOPSIS

Grass Roots Music Venues have intrinsic cultural value. They provide shared social experiences. They offer emerging artists their first opportunities, and they stimulate local economies. [The Music Venue Trust's 2024 Annual Report](#) acknowledges a significant decline in the number of grass roots venues, with two closing every month in the UK. It also emphasizes the need for practical interventions and action to address the challenges facing the grass roots sector. The UKRI-AHRC CoSTAR National Lab (CNSL) and the UKRI-AHRC MusicFutures Creative Cluster (Liverpool City Region) are now inviting UK-based companies to develop and pilot creative and technologically innovative ideas that will start to address some of these challenges. We are seeking ideas that can extend the reach of grass roots venues, that can connect artists and audiences in new ways inside grass roots venues, and that point toward new portable and scalable business models and solutions. This is an opportunity for companies to develop, test and own IP that they can then go onto commercialise. Selected companies will be provided with extensive research conducted by CoSTAR National Lab across the UK's live music sector and dedicated access to our technical infrastructure and research teams to deliver their ideas.

Applicants can apply for cash funding of up to £40,000 per project. We are seeking to award up to three projects, one of which will take place inside the MusicFutures Cluster (Liverpool City Region). Awarded projects will have access to the [CoSTAR National Lab Futures Studio](#) in Egham Surrey for prototyping and rehearsing in October / November / December 2025 as well as access to Music Futures facilities in Liverpool. Pilots will then be tested on location in front of audiences at grass roots venues across the UK. Pilots will have to complete location testing by 27 February 2026.

WHAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR

We are seeking proposals from applicants that will use new and emerging technologies and research expertise to tackle some of the grass root sector's unique challenges from a venue and artist perspective. Proposals should explore and innovate in the context of shared live experience and the role that technologies can play in shifting and extending its boundaries for grass roots venues.

Drawing on the findings from the CoSTAR National Lab research on the UK's live music sector we are seeking projects that will explore the connection and engagement between performers, audience and venue. These could include (but are not limited to) the following areas:

- Technology interventions that are easy to access and that are portable and scalable within grass roots venues.
- The opportunity for audiences to play a more active role and generate and contribute towards a shared experience through a mix of virtual and in-person elements.
- The benefits and opportunities afforded by digital twins of venues – e.g., via hybrid and spatial performance.
- Distributed co-operation and exchange between performers and audiences that support and incentivize the development of new business models.
- The ethical use of AI in support of performance acknowledges the provenance of data, supports human creativity, and rewards participation.

We are asking that each project application includes at least one grass roots venue as a consortia partner ([as defined by the Music Venue Trust](#)) and at least one live performer. You will need to supply letters of support evidencing both as part of your application. Project proposals should also include plans to test pilots on location in front of audiences in January and February 2026. In order to capture sufficient data, we are asking that each pilot is tested at least twice with different audiences at each event. Venue sizes will differ, but we are prioritizing a shared live experience and anticipating ideas that will need to reach at least 50-200 people at the same time physically and, where relevant, many more virtually.

CoSTAR AND MUSICFUTURES SUPPORT

The CoSTAR National Lab and MusicFutures Team are collaborating to support up to three projects:

- Two with the CoSTAR National Lab team, based in Egham, Surrey. Applicants can be from anywhere in the UK.
- One with the MusicFutures team, based in Liverpool. The lead applicant must be a Liverpool City Region based company working with either a Liverpool City Region based grass roots music venue or Performer. Please see map below:



All applicants will be automatically considered for selection for CoSTAR support. Applicants from inside Liverpool City Region will be asked to indicate this in the application form on Submittable.

SOCIAL IMPACT

Environmental Sustainability and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) are central to our work at CoSTAR and all our Access Programmes. All projects, regardless of their main R&D focus, are expected to have a demonstrable engagement with either EDI, sustainability, or both. This will be supported by training and mentorship in social impact areas that include; equitable design, developing environmental sustainability principles, and working with diverse user groups.

The application will ask you to outline how your proposal and project team intend to engage with either EDI or sustainability (or both) and the additional support you would most benefit from.

Please consider:

- Does your company have an EDI policy/action plan?
- What experience, if any, does the team have in delivering ‘inclusive innovation’? e.g. working with diverse user groups, engaging in participatory design, developing assistive technology, or addressing bias in emerging technologies.
- Is your business actively integrating sustainability principles into its products, strategies, and operations?
- Any there any specific challenges or opportunities relating to sustainability arising from your project?
- What experience, if any, does the team have of addressing technological challenges around sustainability and carbon measurement?

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY (IP) ARRANGEMENTS

Successful Applicants will own any new IP created through their projects. If the successful applicant commercialises the project and achieves net sales in excess of £500,000 then we would have three months to agree a revenue share agreement for the payment to us of a 2% royalty of net sales up to the maximum value of the subgrant funding awarded (and we would use those royalty funds to support our CoSTAR facility). Should the Successful Applicant have not commercialised any new IP within 2 years of the project completion, the rights will be assigned to CoSTAR National Lab in order to further CoSTAR Network's public purposes. In addition, Successful Applicants have the option to use available CoSTAR National Lab background IP under a free licence for the purposes of the project, with any background to be clearly detailed and agreed at the point of contracting. Any use of background IP for commercial purposes beyond the project will be subject to agreeing a commercial licence. IP created by the Successful Applicant with CoSTAR National Lab can be used for R&D purposes by the CoSTAR Network. If a different company (the 'Non-Applicant Company') who has created IP with any lab in the CoSTAR Network, wishes to use the IP developed by the Successful Applicant for commercialisation purposes, then such IP will be licenced to the Non-Applicant Company subject to payment of royalties to the Successful Applicant, to the Lab (where the Successful Applicants IP was developed) and to the lab of the CoSTAR Network where the Non-Applicant Company developed the IP.

WHAT IS ON OFFER

Successful projects will have the opportunity to access:

- One-week development sprint at the CoSTAR National Lab Futures Studio. This includes on-boarding and orientation on the required equipment by our technical team. Please see a description of the CoSTAR National Lab facilities below.
- Facilities at Liverpool John Moores University Media Lab, Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts Motion Capture Studio and studio workspace at Liverpool ACC Arena.
- Research staff will guide and collaborate with you during your project's development both in the studio R&D phase and during location testing. Please see the description of the research expertise on offer below.

- Cash funding of up to £40,000 to contribute towards costs in undertaking the project, such as contracting performers, venue hire, design, consumables, eligible freelance support etc. Please see section on Eligible Costs in the full Call Brief which is available to download (see section on How to Apply).
- In addition, if a project requires a period of residency (two or more days) and if travel distance is more than two hours from either CoSTAR National Lab or MusicFutures facilities, a company stipend of up to £4,000 is available to support travel and accommodation. The total value of this support package is valued at over £140,000 per project. Up to three projects will be funded as part of this call.

DETAILED LIST OF RESOURCES

Please note the resources available below are available to all three selected companies (dependent on need and availability) regardless of whether they are working with the CoSTAR National Lab or MusicFutures team.

CoSTAR National Lab Research Expertise:

CoSTAR National Lab will contribute R&D expertise that will support successful applicants in the development and delivery of their project. The team has expertise across; narrative and games design, virtual worlds and real-time visual effects, motion and volumetric capture, user testing and audience research, multi-sensory perception, business modelling, live performance, and event production.

MusicFutures Research Expertise:

MusicFutures will contribute R&D expertise across immersive experience design, music industry, creative and interactive technology development, mobile app design and development, IP and data analysis.

CoSTAR National Lab Equipment and Facilities include:

Virtual Production Capability:

- LED Virtual Production wall (10.5m x 3.5m with 2.5mm pixel pitch)
- LED Wild Wall (1.2m x 2.4m with a 5mm pixel pitch)

- 2x Brompton LED processors
- Mo-sys camera tracking
- Unreal Engine Virtual Production workflow & Control System (PC's)
- Disguise Servers (RX3, VX4+)
- Disguise Designer and Renderstream

Advanced Audio capability:

- 7.1.4 multichannel audio playback and up to 16.2.5.4
- 27-channel immersive Genelec loudspeaker system
- Multichannel Audio reproduction - Currently up to 27, but extensible
- 16 x Line Audio CM4 microphones for sound spatialisation
- Acoustically treated studio
- AES67 (Dante/Ravenna) Audio networking

Lighting DMX controlled stage / film lighting:

- Lighting package of KinoFlo Mimiks x4, Arri Orbiter x3, Arri L5-C x4, Arri S60-C x4, Arri S360-C x2, KinoFlo FreeStyle T24 x2, Avolites Quartz lighting desk

Cameras:

- Arri Alexa LF camera package
- Prime and zoom lenses
- Egrement camera dolly and jib arm.

Connectivity:

- **Inside the Studio:** 48 port 100M/1G edge switch with capacity for 4 SFP+ up to 10G each.
- **To/From Studio:** dedicated single mode fibre link at 10Gb via Janet link to the outside world (contended 10Gb).

MusicFutures Equipment and Facilities include:

- **LJMU MediaLab Access** - Adaptable Projection/Green Screen Environment with Camera Tracking Set Up, Motion Capture Suits, VR/AR Headsets, Various Sensors and Display Units & Render Workstations (Unreal/Unity).
- **LIPA Motion Capture Studio** – 18 Camera Optitrack Studio for up to 3 performers and compute
- **Office and Studio Workspace** at ACC Arena Liverpool

WHO CAN APPLY

This competition invites applications from companies and consortia partners across the UK. Consortia may include a variety of UK-based companies, technologists, researchers and creative practitioners, however, the lead applicant must be a UK-based company and demonstrate a high level of ambition to deliver technological advancement and business growth in its application to creative industries challenges.

We are also asking that each project application includes at least one grass roots venue as a consortia partner ([as defined by the Music Venue Trust](#)) and at least one live performer. You will need to supply letters of support evidencing both as part of your application.

Organisations applying must meet the following Eligibility Criteria;

- Have a lead applicant that is an enterprise or legal entity registered and trading in the UK
- Have at least [one grass roots venue](#) included as part of their application and include a letter of support to this effect
- Have at least one live performer included as part of their application and include a letter of support to this effect
- Have secured all necessary licenses and clearances for a live shared performance
- Be from or support the screen and/or performance sectors
- Have an operations and/or project team based in the UK
- Intend to carry out any project work arising from this award in the UK
- Intend to exploit the results of work from or in the UK

- Only include eligible project costs in their application (see guidance on Eligible Costs below)
- Not attribute more than 75% of project costs to subcontractors. Subcontractors can be from anywhere in the UK
- For the MusicFutures Award, the lead applicant must be a Liverpool City Region based company working with either a Liverpool City Region based grass roots music venue or Performer

ELIGIBLE COSTS

ALLOWABLE COMPANY COSTS

- Travel and subs - if a project requires a period of residency (two or more days) at the relevant Lab and if travel distance is more than two hours by public transport or car from that lab, a company stipend of up to £4,000 is available to eligible companies upon submission of actual costs incurred. Travel and subs may be an area where SMEs applying can demonstrate priority need for use of the Lab via their willingness to share the burden of such costs via in-kind.
- Licensing of relevant software and access to licensable IP
- Materials e.g. props (real or digital)] and design
- Staffing: direct project staff including freelancers
 - No profit element and no mark up of staff / labour
 - A maximum of 20% management of staff overhead on the lead beneficiary [not on the overall budget]
 - Subcontractors can be paid at 100%
- Where the applicant can evidence need for essential hardware not available within CoSTAR required for projects in exceptional cases.
- Reimbursement of costs:
 - Large Organisations 50% of eligible costs
 - SMEs subject to total project cost:
 - ☐ Under £50k = 100% eligible costs
 - ☐ Over £50k = 70% of eligible costs
 - ☐ SMEs must take ownership of their own subsidy control status

- Access to CoSTAR partner facilities that benefit from discounted rates agreed by labs and their partners under CoSTAR arrangements

ALLOWABLE RESEARCH COSTS

- Research staff time not funded by CoSTAR grants elsewhere – to be paid as fixed grant awards with no overheads.

DISALLOWED COSTS

- Overhead of any universities partnering on the project
- SME production fee/profit margin from commercial operators
- Charging of staff within their already funded commitment to CoSTAR grant (include leverage)
- Infrastructure already paid for in the CoSTAR grant
- Use of sub-contractors based solely outside the UK
- Project specific Marketing & Communications activity

HOW TO APPLY

To apply, please complete the online application form on the Submittable platform by the deadline on 12pm, Tuesday August 26, 2025. You will be informed in writing of the outcome within 8 weeks of the closing date unless notified otherwise. In the event of very high application volumes, this timeframe may be extended.

The application form contains 11 questions, each with a limit of 500 words. These questions relate to the assessment criteria outlined below.

During the application process you will be asked for a high-level project plan and budget (where necessary). Please note that if you are successful, you may be asked for more detailed documentation as part of the contracting process.

LETTERS OF SUPPORT GUIDANCE

A project partner is a collaborating organisation or individual who will have an integral role in the proposed research. This may include cash or in-kind contributions such as expertise, staff time or use of facilities. Well-written letters can significantly strengthen research proposals by demonstrating the benefits of the collaboration, and the potential

impacts of the research. It also allows partners to highlight why they support the proposal, and what they hope to get out of it.

WHAT TO INCLUDE

Project partner letters of support are part of the grant application and should be dated within six months of the application submission date and signed by the collaborating organisation's named contact.

A well written project partner letter of support will confirm the organisation's commitment to the proposed project and should identify:

- the relevance and possible benefits of the proposed work to the partner in question
- the period of support, the full nature of the collaboration or support for the project
- how the partner may provide added value (staff time, access to equipment, software, additional materials etc.)

Please make sure you have read **all of the information** available for this call, found in the following documents:

Documents (pdf format)

- Full Call Brief document (this document)
- [Summary of Key Terms](#)
- [Research Data](#)
- [FAQs](#)

For more information, please join our Webinar on Tuesday 22 July from 12.30-14:00 or Monday 4 August from 12.30-14.00 [here](#).

SUPPORT FOR APPLICATIONS

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) are central to our work at CoSTAR and all our Access Programmes. We aim to ensure that applying and participating in our programmes is easy and accessible for all.

Reasonable adjustments may include:

- Submitting an application via a form in Microsoft Word format (available upon request)
- Options made available for video or audio submissions in place of written answers for each section in the application

All webinars will be accessible with visual/written briefs made available for review during and after the event. Individual requests for access support will be accommodated wherever possible and equitable.

CoSTAR also provides Access Support Bursaries, based on a disability, health condition, or access need, to support those making applications to, or participating in, our Industry Access Programmes. For more information on the Access Support Bursaries and how to apply please click [here](#). For any other queries about access needs or reasonable adjustments, please contact costar.pilots@rhul.ac.uk.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

Once CoSTAR has received your application, it will go through a formal assessment process. This will be undertaken by an independent panel of CoSTAR assessors and partners. The assessors will consider the following criteria:

- The problem that your innovation seeks to address is well defined
- The proposed solution is clear and achievable
- The specific R&D focus and/or innovation of the project is novel and well-articulated*
- The proposed solution has strong commercial value, with an appropriate route to market
- The project team has strong leadership, and the range of skills and experience needed to deliver the project
- There is evidence of support from a grass roots venue and artist with appropriate frameworks in place around licensing and right management

- The project management plan and approach to risk management is appropriate and achievable*
- The request for CoSTAR/MusicFutures support is clear and reasonable
- There is a clear rationale for why CoSTAR/MusicFutures support is required to progress and/or accelerate the project
- The project is of clear value to the performance and/or screen sectors
- There is a strong approach to engaging with Social Impact (EDI and/or Environmental Sustainability)

**denotes criteria that will receive double weighting during the assessment process*