



# LEAF | Oxford

## Practitioner Handbook 2026

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### Introduction

This handbook supports University of Oxford researchers—including Principal Investigators, laboratory technicians, managers, postdoctoral researchers, and students—to understand the Sustainable Laboratory programme and how to achieve accreditation through the Laboratory Efficiency Assessment Framework (LEAF).

#### Why is sustainable research important?

Research delivers profound benefits to society. However, the process of research also carries environmental and social impacts. Laboratory-based research is uniquely resource- and energy-intensive. It consumes significant materials, generates substantial waste, and operates within complex global supply chains. Recognising this dual impact is essential. Sustainable research is not about limiting ambition, instead it is about aligning scientific excellence with responsible practice. The aim should be to produce world-leading research that operates within environmental limits on which science depends and operates within.

By embedding principles of sustainability, we maximise the positive net impact of our work while respecting the boundaries of the world in which it takes place.

#### How Do We Define a Laboratory?

It is important to clarify terminology. Research at Oxford may be broadly grouped into six

categories: laboratory-based research, computational research, clinical research, qualitative research, field-based research, and cross-cutting or interdisciplinary research.

Researchers working across these categories may use a range of shared facilities, including laboratory spaces. However, in the context of LEAF and the Sustainable Labs programme, the term *laboratory* has a specific meaning.

For LEAF purposes, a laboratory refers to a space in which experimental research involving biological, chemical, biochemical, molecular, materials, or other bench-based scientific processes is carried out. These environments typically involve controlled conditions, specialist equipment (for example, fume cupboards, ultra-low temperature freezers, incubators, or autoclaves), and the routine use of consumables and reagents. They are generally characterised by higher energy demand, regulated waste streams, and technical infrastructure requirements.

This definition distinguishes laboratory-based research from primarily computational, desk-based, or theoretical research, even where those activities are located within a building that also houses laboratories.

## What is LEAF?

The **Laboratory Efficiency Assessment Framework** (LEAF) was developed by University College London (UCL) to improve the sustainability and operational efficiency of laboratory research environments.

It provides a structured, evidence-based standard across ten impact areas, including energy use, waste management, procurement,

equipment efficiency, and research culture. Laboratories progress through bronze, silver, and gold award levels by demonstrating defined practices.

LEAF was introduced at Oxford in 2021. Since then, participation has expanded significantly. By 2026, the programme includes more than 800 practitioners in over 400 laboratories.

At Oxford, LEAF serves two functions:

- It improves laboratory efficiency and economic performance.
- It provides a recognised accreditation mechanism aligned with funder expectations.

## What is the concordat?

In 2025, the University of Oxford became a signatory to the **Concordat for the Environmental Sustainability of Research and Innovation Practice**, alongside major funders including Wellcome and Cancer Research UK.

The Concordat commits signatories to ensure that research and innovation are conducted responsibly and with active regard for environmental impact. It recognises that research systems must reduce their own emissions and environmental footprint while continuing to deliver excellence.

This marked a significant shift in sector expectations. Environmental sustainability is no longer an optional enhancement to research practice; it is an embedded responsibility. LEAF provides a practical mechanism to deliver on these commitments.



## Is LEAF for me?

LEAF is typically used by two groups of practitioners. Those who wish to improve the environmental performance and efficiency of their laboratories as part of responsible research practice. And those who require accreditation to meet funder conditions.

For researchers working primarily in non-laboratory settings (for example, computational or desk-based environments), LEAF may provide useful insight but may not be the most suitable tool. The Sustainable Research Practice programme is currently exploring additional mechanisms to support sustainability compliance and best practice in dry-lab and non-laboratory contexts.

## Compliance

From 2026, researchers undertaking work funded by Wellcome or Cancer Research UK (CRUK) must hold recognised sustainability accreditation if they meet certain specifications. At Oxford, LEAF is currently the default programme.

Funder	Conditions
Wellcome	Sustainability consideration must be demonstrated for all funded projects. <b>Minimum requirement</b> - LEAF Bronze.
CRUK	Sustainable practice must be demonstrated for wet-lab based projects. Minimum requirement - LEAF Silver.

UKRI	Ambition to set generic requirement by 2029 <i>*No requirement as of 2026</i>
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Research groups must secure the required award level before submitting funding applications. Extensions are not available.

Failure to provide evidence of the required LEAF level may affect eligibility to secure or retain funding. Requirements depend on the nature of the research activity and the specific terms set by the funder. Research groups should review funder guidance carefully and seek clarification where needed. The Sustainable Research Practice team can provide advice during drop-in sessions.

## Award Validity and Renewal

There has previously been confusion between how LEAF awards appear on the UCL LEAF platform and how long they are recognised for funder compliance. It is important to distinguish between these two timeframes.

On the LEAF platform, awards appear to expire after one year. This reflects the programme's design, which encourages annual review and continuous improvement.

However, for the purposes of funder compliance, a LEAF certificate is recognised as valid for three years from the date of certification, where accreditation is required as a funding condition (for example, by Wellcome or CRUK).

In practice, this means that required laboratories must renew their LEAF accreditation at least every three years to

maintain compliance with applicable funder requirements; however, we recommend yearly accreditation to maintain momentum. The three-year validity relates specifically to funder recognition of certification status.

*For example:*

- If your laboratory received a LEAF award in 2023, renewal is required in 2026.
- If your laboratory received a LEAF award in 2025, accreditation remains valid until 2028.

Research groups should monitor their certification date carefully, particularly where LEAF is linked to funding eligibility. Renewal should be planned well in advance to avoid any lapse in compliance.

### How to renew your LEAF award?

Award renewal is straightforward. If you are renewing for funding compliance or as part of best practice the process is the same. You can renew your award at the same level via the LEAF platform using your previous years answers (which should automatically carry over) or you can work towards the next award level. If you choose to remain at the same award level as last year, please make sure to update your answers with progress made and new interventions. You should also take this as an opportunity to reflect on how closely lab activities align with given answers and course correct if necessary.

## Key Dates | 2026

The 2026 LEAF cycle runs from **4 March to 19 June 2026**. All submissions, audits, and certification decisions take place within this period.

Key dates are as follows:

- **Cycle opens:** Wednesday 4 March 2026
- **Submission deadline:** Friday 15 May 2026
- **Audit allocation:** by Friday 22 May 2026
- **Audit deadline / cycle closes:** Friday 19 June 2026

<b>2026 Programme start</b>
• 4 March 2026
<b>Kick-off webinar</b>
• 18 March
<b>LEAF submission</b>
• 15 May 2026
<b>Audit allocation</b>
• 22 May 2026
<b>Audit submission</b>
• 19 June 2026
<b>Accreditation approval</b>
• July 2026

Research groups intending to submit in 2026 must complete their criteria and upload evidence by the submission deadline. Audit allocation will be completed over the following week, with all audits completed before the cycle closes in June.

Please diarise these dates at the start of the cycle and begin preparation early. Early engagement reduces administrative pressure and improves submission quality.

## Drop-In Sessions

Drop-in sessions will run fortnightly on Wednesdays at lunchtime (30 minutes). Details are available in the Webinars and Key Dates tab within the LEAF Teams sub-channel.

These sessions are intended to:

- Encourage peer learning
- Surface shared challenges
- Reduce duplication of email queries
- Provide live clarification on common issues

Practitioners are encouraged to raise questions during these sessions wherever possible. These sessions are open to all members of the Oxford research community.

### Drop-in calendar

Wednesday, 18 March 1PM	Kick-off Webinar	<a href="#">Join link</a>
Wednesday, 1 April 12 PM	Drop-in	<a href="#">Join link</a>
Wednesday, 15 April 1PM	Drop-in	<a href="#">Join link</a>
Wednesday, 29 April 12PM	Drop-in	<a href="#">Join link</a>
Wednesday, 6 May	Drop-in	<a href="#">Join link</a>
Wednesday, 13 May	Drop-in	<a href="#">Join link</a>

*If a session needs to be cancelled, a notice will be posted in the Sustainable Lab Leaders Microsoft Teams group.*

## Managing your submission

Each group submitting to LEAF should appoint at least one Sustainability Champion to coordinate the process. These persons should be volunteers and be in a position of responsibility to oversee progress against the

criteria, organises evidence collection, and serve as the main point of contact with local sustainability groups, and the central sustainability team.

The Principal Investigator (PI) is also expected to support the submission and engage where required. This includes enabling sufficient time and resources to complete the criteria. PI involvement is particularly important where actions relate to procurement decisions, equipment management, or changes to established laboratory practices.

In larger or more complex laboratory environments, coordination can be demanding. Responsibilities should therefore be shared across the team. Delegating specific tasks—such as freezer audits, waste reviews, or equipment inventories—helps distribute workload fairly and promotes collective ownership.

### Balancing LEAF with Day-to-Day Research Activity

LEAF should be integrated into routine laboratory management rather than treated as a standalone project. The following practical approaches can help balance LEAF activity with day-to-day research demands:

- **Start early in the cycle.** Review the criteria at the beginning of the LEAF window and identify actions that require behavioural change, data collection, or equipment review. Early planning avoids last-minute pressure.
- **Embed actions into existing meetings.** Allocate brief agenda time in lab meetings to discuss progress, assign tasks, or review criteria. This avoids creating additional standalone meetings.

- **Distribute responsibility.** Assign discrete actions to individuals (for example, freezer temperature checks, waste signage updates, procurement review). Shared ownership reduces burden on any single team member.
- **Align LEAF tasks with existing compliance activity.** Many LEAF criteria overlap with health and safety checks, equipment maintenance logs, induction processes, and procurement procedures. Where possible, use existing documentation rather than duplicating effort.
- **Prioritise proportionate effort.** Not all criteria require the same level of intervention. Focus effort where changes will have meaningful operational or environmental impact.

When managed effectively, LEAF activity supports more efficient laboratory operations and can reduce time spent on equipment issues, waste management problems, and procurement waste in the longer term.

## Kick-Off Checklist

This checklist helps your group confirm requirements, set a target, and access support before starting your LEAF submission.

### Step 1: Confirm Your Requirements

Determine whether LEAF accreditation is mandatory for your group. Some funders require a minimum LEAF award level. Check your funder's terms and conditions to confirm what applies to you. If LEAF is not mandatory, voluntary participation is encouraged.

### Step 2: Choose Your Target Award Level

LEAF has three award levels:

- **Bronze** - baseline standards for laboratory efficiency
- **Silver** - builds on Bronze with additional actions and behavioural measures
- **Gold** - advanced practice and embedded sustainability culture

Select the level that aligns with your funding requirements, operational readiness, and available capacity.

New users must complete all Bronze criteria before progressing to higher levels.

### Step 3: Access Resources and Support

A range of support is available:

- Join the Sustainable Lab Leaders Microsoft Teams group to connect with peers and ask questions.
- Visit the Sustainability Team website and Teams channels for guidance and updates.
- Attend live webinars from 4 March. Recordings will be available afterward.

Engaging early reduces workload later in the cycle.

### Step 4: Decide Your Submission Model

LEAF submissions can be made as:

- **Individual submission** – one research group submits independently
- **Collective submission** – two or more groups submit together
- **Building-wide submission** – multiple groups coordinate a single submission

If considering a collective or building-wide approach, coordinate through existing departmental or building sustainability networks. If you are unsure what networks exist, contact your local Sustainability Team or Green Group. Where none exist, consider

establishing one with colleagues to support coordination and shared practice.

## Audits

Audits are a final yet critical step to acquiring a LEAF award. At Oxford we use a peer-to-to peer system to match groups in different departments together at the same award level. This means you audit another lab and that same lab audits you. We call this an audit pairing.

Audit pairings are allocated from the day after the submission deadline and can take up to a week to finalise. Please be patient during this process, if you have not received an audit pairing up to two weeks after the submission deadline this could be due to two reasons.

1. The audit allocation email has been sent to a different member of your lab. The allocation email is not automatically sent to the person who managed the application. Therefore, audit information can be sent to any registered lab member. To remedy this, consider reducing the number of lab members attached to the LEAF award to only those who need to be involved. This will reduce significant confusion and stress at audit.
2. We may have genuinely missed you out from our audit allocation. At the two-week stage please get in contact with the coordinator who will be able to resolve this for you.

## Expectations of auditors

Audits are a non-negotiable part of acquiring a LEAF certificate. Once assigned, the paired auditors are expected to be proactive in

connecting with their partner lab to coordinate the audit. Auditors are expected to complete the feedback section and submit their partners audit in a timely manner, failure to do this can lead to frustration from labs waiting to receive confirmation. Try not to be the lab that lets the other down.

## Running an audit

Audits can be performed virtually or in-person, but In-person is generally more valuable for both parties. Audits can be hosted simultaneously or back-to-back if run online.

The auditing process is meant to be a constructive and positive experience for both parties. Auditors should ask questions that align with the assessment criteria for each question and offer constructive feedback if possible.

## After the audit

Auditors should complete the audit feedback section fully with feedback and click the submit button.

Certificates will be issued once the coordinator has manually approved each audit. Your certificate will be available on your LEAF dashboard when this has been completed, and you should be notified by email.



## Additional resources

### Sustainable Labs Website and Teams

- [Sustainable laboratories | Sustainability](#)
- [General | Sustainable Lab Leaders | Microsoft Teams](#)

### Criteria checklists

- [LEAF criteria – checklist for new labs](#)

### LEAF platform: register or log in

- [Login | LEAF](#)