

RURAL ENGLAND PROSPERITY FUND: INVESTMENT PLAN FOR COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Cabinet:

- 1.1 Approves the Rural England Prosperity Fund Community Grant awards, totalling £216,164, as set out in Appendix 2.
- 1.2 Delegates to the Strategic Director of Place, Operations and Sustainability, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy, any future request to Defra to alter the 60/40 split between funds to support businesses and those supporting community infrastructure to ensure full take up of our available Rural Fund allocation.
- 1.3 Delegates to the Strategic Director of Place, Operations and Sustainability, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy decisions on how any further Rural Fund resources are allocated in the event that additional funds are made available via the recommendation in paragraph 1.2 or in the event that the projects set out in Appendix 2 are underspent or do not progress.

2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF or 'The Rural Fund') is a top-up to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and is available to eligible local authorities in England. Funding allocations were determined at local authority level, dependant on the area defined as 'rural' and are for the financial years 2023/24 and 2024/25. The total allocation for the New Forest is £540,115 and funding is to be spent by 31 March 2025.
- 2.2 The Rural Fund is a capital grant programme supporting business growth and improvements to community infrastructure, it will not fund revenue costs such as running costs, staffing or promotional activities. In November 2022, following a Portfolio Holder Decision, the fund was allocated 60/40 between projects to support businesses and those supporting community infrastructure. This split was submitted to Defra (Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs), the managing authority for the scheme, as part of the New Forest's UKSPF Investment Plan.
- 2.3 In relation to community projects, the Rural Fund provides capital funding to support new and improved community infrastructure, providing essential community services and assets for local people and businesses to benefit the local economy. The objective of the fund is to: '*strengthen our social fabric and foster a sense of local pride and belonging through investment in activities that enhance physical, cultural and social ties and amenities*'. This includes community infrastructure, local green space and community-led projects. The fund can also support capital grants for provision of net zero infrastructure for rural communities.

2.4 Projects must be within the Rural Fund area, as determined by Defra. A map of the Rural Fund area is at Appendix 1.

2.5 At its meeting of 1 March 2023, Cabinet agreed the following recommendation:

- That the Cabinet agree that an Investment Plan be prepared for Cabinet approval to allocate the Community Infrastructure Improvements.

3. PROCESS FOR DETERMINING RURAL FUND PROJECTS

3.1 The Rural Fund is one of a number of sources of funding which could be made available to community projects in the current year. Other funds include the Council's Capital Grants for Community and the Community Infrastructure Levy.

3.2 The Capital Grants for Community Fund is a discretionary grant to support a range of voluntary and community organisations to carry out projects and provide activities to benefit local people in support of the Council's priorities. It is an annual fund which is designed to support local community projects. Bids are submitted in the autumn and considered by a Task and Finish Group. In February 2023, Cabinet awarded £129,600 of revenue grants and £92,000 in capital grants. A similar process will be followed for a decision early in 2024 with an allocation of £100,000.

3.3 In addition, on 4 October 2023 Cabinet agreed to release £1m of funding from the Community Infrastructure Levy to support local infrastructure projects. Cabinet instructed officers to report back by the end of 2024 with a review of the allocation. The bidding process for CIL is currently underway.

3.4 To simplify the process for applicants, the Rural Fund Community Grants and the Council's Capital Grants for Communities were combined into one application process called 'The Community Grants Scheme'. This was launched on 1 August 2023. Except for the requirement for Rural Fund projects to be within the specified Rural Fund area (see map at Appendix 1), eligibility criteria for both funds were broadly similar. However, the deadline of March 2025 for completion of Rural Fund projects makes readiness and deliverability particularly important considerations for the Rural Fund

3.5 The scheme was publicised via direct emails to members, town and parish councils and community organisations and supported by press releases and social media activity. In total 30 applications were received by the combined fund although not all met the criteria of the Rural Fund.

3.6 There was no upper limit on grant requests and although applicants were encouraged to match fund their project from other sources, this was not essential for the Rural Fund.

3.7 Community Grant applicants were asked to provide:

- details of their organisation and proposed project,

- how their application would meet the needs of, and benefit, residents within the district
 - details of the project costs
 - the start and completion date of the project (Rural Fund projects must be completed and grant monies claimed by 01 Dec 2024)
 - the funding already secured, or grants applied for (if applicable)
 - the number of paid employees whose jobs would be safeguarded by the project.
 - if planning permission is required,
 - the outputs and outcomes from the project.
- 3.8 After the closing date of 31 October, officers from Economic Development, (responsible for administration of the Rural Fund) and Revenues and Benefits, (responsible for administration of the Council's Capital Grants for Communities) determined the potential appropriate source of funding for each application, based on its location (ie, whether it was within the Rural Fund area) and according to the priorities and objectives of each funder.
- 3.9 Applications that met basic Rural Fund criteria ie were in the fund area and required capital funding above the minimum grant rate of £5,000, requested total funding of over £528,000; more than double the available Rural Fund budget of £216,046.
- 3.10 Projects which were assessed as eligible were ranked by four criteria – deliverability in the timeframe, readiness to progress, the degree to which they would be transformative for the local area and the breadth of impact in terms of users of the facility. In a small number of cases, projects identified as being more suited to a CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) bid than the Rural Fund bid were ruled out on that basis.
- 3.11 The recommendations outlined in this report do not constitute an absolute decision to fund or not fund a particular project; rather they identify those projects which are most relevant solely to the Rural Fund. This is particularly important given the relatively short window for delivery of the Rural Fund. Projects which have not been selected for the Rural Fund will be signposted to other potential funding routes – most obviously CIL or the Council's Capital Grants for Communities Task and Finish Group. Projects will be informed that the Council scheme is a competitive process and they are not guaranteed funding. These alternative funding sources are also administered by the Council. Projects may also become reserve projects for a Rural Fund allocation in the event that additional resources are made available, as set out in Paragraph 4.
- 3.12 The recommendations for each of the grant requests, are summarised in Appendix 2.

4. BUSINESS FUND

- 4.1 A separate process is currently underway to assess applications for the business element of the Rural Fund. In the event that the business fund does not receive the requisite number of eligible applications to utilise all of the funding (ie £324,000), it will be appropriate to approach DEFRA to allow any underspend to be used to support additional community projects. It is proposed that the business fund remain

open until 31 March 2024 and, at that point, consideration be given as to whether the 60/40 split between funds to support businesses and community infrastructure be reviewed. It is further proposed that such a decision is delegated to the Executive Director in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy along with decisions relating to how such funds are allocated.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 None: the proposals set out in Appendix 2 are fully funded by the Rural England Prosperity Fund. A proportion of the Shared Prosperity Fund (4%) is available to assist authorities in implementing both the UKSPF fund and the Rural Fund.

6. CRIME & DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 None.

7. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The proposed Rural Fund grant awards will enable community organisations to improve the energy efficiency and resilience of community buildings.

8. EQUALITY & DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The Rural Fund will support organisations within the rural areas of the district to support, engage and benefit our communities and residents.

9. DATA PROTECTION IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 None.

10. PLACE AND SUSTAINABILITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL COMMENTS

- 10.1 The Panel supported the process for allocating Community Projects as set out in this report and the principle of referring unsuccessful bids to other potential funding sources if appropriate. The Scrutiny Panel asked questions on DEFRA's criteria for rural funding eligibility and made comments relating to the application process.

11. PORTFOLIO HOLDER COMMENTS

- 11.1 I am very pleased that we are able to support our rural communities through the Rural England Prosperity Fund. In particular, I am delighted that we have a wide range of projects recommended for support that will benefit all parts of our district. The grants will help well used community facilities to be more sustainable, resilient, and accessible. This will enable the grant recipients to continue to deliver important services and help to foster a sense of local pride and belonging through activities that enhance physical, cultural and social ties. Where we have not been able to directly fund projects through the Rural Fund we will, where appropriate, signpost organisations to alternative funding options.

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Background Papers:

Business, High Streets & Tourism Portfolio Holder
Decision – 21 November 2022

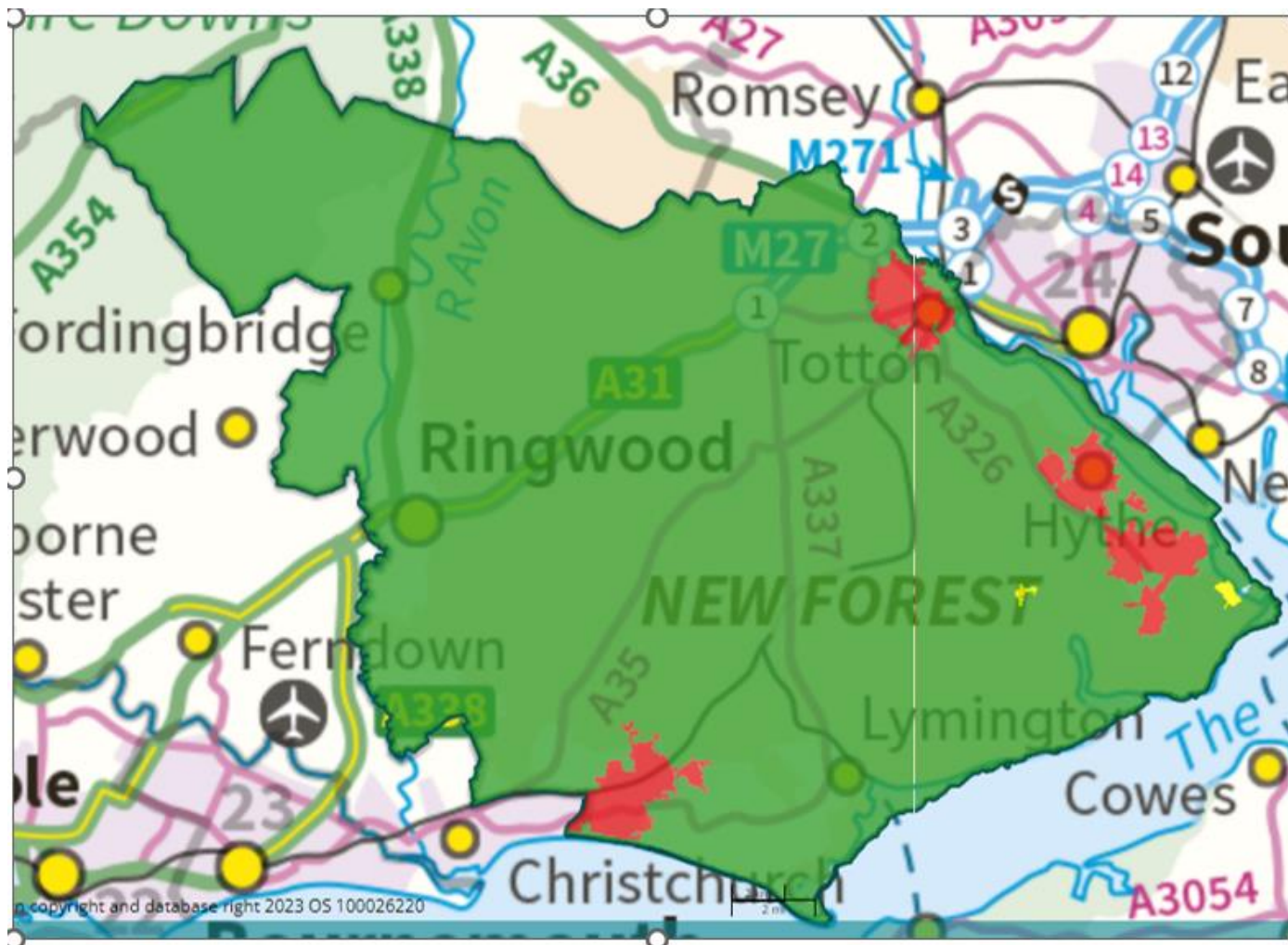
Cabinet Report: UK Shared Prosperity Fund - 29
July 2022

Cabinet Report: Rural England Prosperity Fund
Wednesday, 01 March 2023

Cabinet Report: Rural England Prosperity Fund
Wednesday, 05 July 2023

Rural England Prosperity Fund: prospectus
Published 3 September 2022 available at
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rural-england-prosperity-fund-prospectus>

Appendix 1: Map of New Forest Rural Fund Area



Key

Green = Area covered by REPF

Red = urban area not eligible for REPF

Yellow = area needing confirmation of eligibility

Appendix 2: RURAL FUND COMMUNITY GRANT APPLICATIONS:

SUMMARY

Number of applications submitted to combined Community Fund	30
Total grant requested by all applications broadly eligible for REPF	£528,349.16
REPF Community Budget available (at 40% of total REPF budget)	£216,046.00
Total Value of Recommended Applications* (*if necessary, the small over-commitment will be met from wider REPF budget)	£216,164.50

2.a Summary of projects recommended for REPF Funding

	Applicant Name	Project summary	Users of facility per week	Location	Total Project Cost	£ Grant Request	£ Grant Award	Recommendations	Rationale
1	SPUD: spudWorks	SPUD is an arts charity that also provides workspace for small businesses in the creative sector. The project will install an Air Source Heat Pump and Solar panels within the former ArtSway buildings.	200	Sway	£21,274	£21,274	£21,274	Eligible, meets REPF priorities	The project will improve the sustainability and resilience of the spudWorks building. The project scored highly on each of the criteria in particular, because the project will ultimately support both local businesses (a REPF priority) and the community.
2	NFDC: St Georges Hall Calshot	To improve the layout of the hall and other rooms as well as an upgraded kitchen and DDA accessible toilets.	220	Calshot	£375,054	£161,138	£62,638*	Eligible, meets REPF priorities	Transformation of the hall would bring about greater community cohesion, improving the higher-than-average deprivation and health inequalities found in this isolated part of the district. The project scored highly on each of the criteria because the project will be transformative in nature and detailed plans for the proposed works were provided. <i>*Grant award capped at minimum required for Phase 1 of the project to proceed.</i>
3	The Hulse Hall Breamore	Installation of air-source heat pump and solar panels.	300	Breamore	£21,020	£10,510	£10,510	Eligible, meets REPF priorities	The project will improve the sustainability and resilience of this community asset, through investment in renewable energy infrastructure. The project scored highly due to the impact of the project on the number of users of the facility and the deliverability of the proposals.
4	1st Fording-	Refurbishment of toilet	90	Fording-	£20,655	£10,300	£10,300	Eligible,	The building hosts community meetings as well as the

	bridge Scout Group	and shower facilities so they are accessible to all users of the hall.		bridge				meets REPF priorities	Scout group. The grant will improve the accessibility of the hall to a wider range of users, particularly young people with mobility issues. The project scored highly due to the transformative nature of the proposals and the readiness of the project.
5	The Bramshaw Trust	To replace windows, external doors, fire door and replace cladding.	125	Bramshaw	£60,083	£50,083	£50,083	Eligible, meets REPF priorities	The project will improve the sustainability and resilience of this community asset. The project scored highly due to the readiness of the project and the deliverability of the proposals.
6	Netley Marsh Community Hall	Installation of solar power, CCTV, Broadband & Wi-Fi.	380	Netley Marsh	£31,860	£26,860	£26,860	Eligible, meets REPF priorities	The project will improve the sustainability and resilience of this community asset. The project scored highly due to the readiness of the project and the impact of the proposals.
7	Lyndhurst & District Community Association	To refurbish a roof and improve the central heating system.	1350	Lyndhurst	£35,000	£17,500	£17,500	Eligible, meets REPF priorities	The project will improve the sustainability and resilience of this community asset, through a more responsive and efficient heating system and refurbishment of a roof. The project scored highly due to the deliverability of the project and the impact of the proposals for the centre's considerable number of users.
8	Hale Village Hall	Ceiling Insulation to reduce energy bills	500	Hale	£24,000	£10,000	£10,000	Eligible, meets REPF priorities	The project will improve the sustainability and resilience of this community asset. The project scored highly due to the readiness of the project and the impact of the proposals for its users.
9	Sway Youth Centre	To improve access to the area outside the centre to enable it to be used as an outside space	100+	Sway	£16,603	£7,000	£7,000	Eligible, meets REPF priorities	The project will lead to an improvement in useable and accessible community space outside the building, leading to an increased range of groups & individuals using the facility. This project scored well on its deliverability within the REPF timeframe and improvements to accessibility for the users of the hall.

2.b. Summary of projects broadly eligible for REPF but not recommended for REPF grant:

The following projects were not selected for REPF funding as they received appraisal scores of less than 14 (out of a maximum of 20)

	Applicant	Project summary	Next steps for application
1	Lymington Community Association	To fund solar panels for new café building	To be considered by NFDC Capital Funds Task & Finish
2	Greyfriars Community Centre-Ringwood & District Community Association	Replacement of the worn-out main Greyfriars Hall floor to ensure the space is safe for all users of the facility	To be considered by NFDC Capital Funds Task & Finish
3	Lyndhurst Drama and Musical Society	Provide a Changing Facility for children to re-establish the Youth Theatre Group in Lyndhurst	To be considered by NFDC Capital Funds Task & Finish
4	Fawley Parish Council: Gang Warily Inclusive Group Improvements	To buy a Thera Trainer Balo, specialist equipment for use of the Gang Warily Inclusive group (GIG), who aim to improve people's mobility, such as Stroke sufferers.	To be considered by NFDC Capital Funds Task & Finish
5	Brockenhurst cricket club	To replace the cricket pavilion: changing rooms, showers, toilets etc.	To be considered by NFDC Capital Funds Task & Finish
6	Boldre Parish Council	To improve the recreation ground so that it will provide new opportunities for all ages	Direct to CIL
7	Sway Parish Council	To develop children's playground for children of all ages including teenagers	Direct to CIL
8	Fordingbridge Town Council	Funding for Accessible circular path at Fordingbridge Recreation Ground	Direct to CIL

2.c. Other Applications received by the combined Community Fund but not eligible for REPF:

	Applicant	Project Summary	Next steps for application
1	Bashley Village Hall	For Installation of Solar Panels	Not eligible for other funds as project already completed
2	Totton Sharks Basketball Club	Requires funding to pay for court hire	To be considered by NFDC Revenue Fund for Communities
3	Healthy Haven Garden	Requires funding for benches	To be considered by NFDC Capital Fund for Communities
4	Lymington Cricket Club	Requires funding for bowling machine	To be considered by NFDC Capital Fund for Communities
5	Orchard Junior School	Requires funding for a minibus	To be considered by NFDC Capital Fund for Communities
6	New Forest Pride	Requires revenue funding for event	To be considered by NFDC Revenue Fund for Communities
7	Sway Cricket Club	Requires funding for cricket nets	To be considered by NFDC Capital Fund for Communities
8	Ringwood and District Round Table	Requires funding for skate ramp at Poulner Skate Park	To be considered by NFDC Capital Fund for Communities
9	Burley Cricket Club	Requires funding for cricket nets	To be considered by NFDC Capital Fund for Communities
10	New Forest for Ukraine	Funding for collection and delivery service - Electric Forklift Truck & Ford Transit van with tail lift	To be considered by NFDC Capital Fund for Communities
11	Foxies Future	Funding for the purchase of Foxlease Activity Centre	To be considered by NFDC Capital Fund for Communities
12	Totton and Eling Town Council: (Eling Tide Mill)	Eling Tide Mill Community Engagement Project: to improve the facility layout for wider community use/benefit.	To be considered by NFDC Capital Fund for Communities

13	Lymington Town Sailing Club Ltd	Install Solar PV, improve building insulation, futureproof energy system.	To be invited to apply for REPF Business Grants (as Ltd Company)
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