

RURAL ENGLAND PROSPERITY FUND REVIEW OF INVESTMENT PRIORITIES

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) is a top-up to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and is available to eligible local authorities in England. In total the New Forest was awarded £540,115.00 from REPF.
- 1.2 To access funding under REPF, Local Authorities were asked to provide specific additional information as an Addendum to their UKSPF Investment Plan. The New Forest addendum proposed funding was used, via direct grants to recipients, to support the following REPF Investment Priorities:
- support for new and existing rural businesses to develop new products and facilities that will be of wider benefit to the local economy.
 - support for new and improved community infrastructure, providing essential community services and assets for local people and businesses to benefit the local economy.
- 1.3 The REPF Addendum proposals were approved by the Portfolio Holder on 22 November 2022. This included a local decision that funds be split 60/40 between business and community infrastructure grants.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 All REPF Funds must be fully spent by 31 March 2025. As projects take time to complete and can experience delays, 01 December 2024 has been set as the final date for projects to be completed and claim their grant monies from the Council. Any unspent funds must be returned to government.
- 2.2 The REPF business grant scheme opened in August 2023. Whilst grants have already been allocated to businesses, uptake has been slower than anticipated.
- 2.3 The REPF community infrastructure grant scheme also opened in August 2023 and has now fully allocated its budget to projects as agreed with Cabinet on 06 December 2023. However, in order to support a wide range of community infrastructure projects, not all REPF community applicants received their full grant request. In addition, there are projects submitted to the Council's CIL fund (Community Infrastructure Levy) that are more closely aligned to the funding priorities of REPF.

3. PROPOSAL

- 3.1 Given the REPF deadline, it is proposed that a proportion of funds from the remaining business grants are reallocated to the community infrastructure grant scheme. This will enable further support for impactful projects to benefit our communities and help to ensure the REPF allocation is utilised in full within the district by the closure deadline.

The REPF business grant scheme will remain open to new applications, albeit with a reduced budget.

3.2 This proposal is in-line with Cabinet decisions on 06 December 2024:

That the Cabinet:

- b) 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; and
- c) 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 resolution b) above, or in the event that the projects set out in Appendix 2 of the Cabinet report are underspent or do not progress.

3.3 The Portfolio Holder has been consulted and supports the proposed decision in line with the delegation.

3.4 Since the discussions at Cabinet, the roles of the two Government departments involved in the delivery of REPF, Defra (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs) and DLUHC (The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) have been clarified. Reporting on the REPF is now incorporated into UK SPF reports to DLUHC only.

3.5 UK SPF guidance has been reviewed by officers as to the requirements for reporting changes to the REPF Addendum. The proposed changes do not constitute a 'material change' as defined in the guidance. Therefore, the reporting requirements are solely to provide an update on these changes to DLUHC as part of the Council's regular UK SPF reporting cycle.

4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1 The proposals will ensure that communities within the district are able to benefit from additional support for important community facilities whilst also ensuring that the REPF allocation is utilised in full within the district by the closure deadline.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The proposal relates to the movement of funds from the existing REPF business grant scheme to enable further support for community infrastructure projects. There are no implications to the overall REPF budget or to the costs associated with administering the scheme.

6. CRIME & DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

6.1 There are none.

7. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 REPF supports investments that contribute to net zero and nature recovery objectives. These include:

- the UK's commitment to cut greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050
- wider environmental considerations, such as resilience to natural hazards
- the 25 Year Environment Plan commitments

7.2 Projects that deliver the greatest economic, environmental and social benefits are prioritised.

8. EQUALITY & DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

8.1 The REPF recognises disparity between urban and rural parts of the district.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 That the proposals outlined in this document be approved.

10. STRATEGIC DIRECTOR ENDORSEMENT

I have agreed to the recommendation of this report.

Sign: JAMES CARPENTER

Date: 7th March 2024

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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

Cabinet Report: Rural England Prosperity Fund
Wednesday, 06 December 2023

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