



Please ask for: Democratic Services
Direct Dial: (01892) 554413
E-mail: committee@tunbridgewells.gov.uk
Date: Dddday DD Mmmm YYYY

Dear All

COMMUNITIES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CABINET ADVISORY BOARD - WEDNESDAY 9 NOVEMBER 2022

I enclose, for consideration at the next meeting of the Communities and Economic Development Cabinet Advisory Board on Wednesday 9 November 2022, the following items that were unavailable when the agenda was published.

Agenda No Item

8 **Rural England Prosperity Fund** (Pages 2 - 24)

Kind regards,

Emer Moran
Democratic Services

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Rural England Prosperity Fund

For Cabinet on 17 November 2022

Summary

Lead Member: Justine Rutland, Cabinet Member for Tunbridge Wells Town and Local Areas, Nancy Warne, Cabinet Member for Rural Communities

Lead Director: Lee Colyer, Director of Finance, Policy and Development

Head of Service: David Candlin, Head of Economic Development & Property

Report Author: Hilary Smith, Economic Development Manager

Classification: Public document (non-exempt)

Wards Affected: All

Approval Timetable	Date
Management Board	25 October 2022
Portfolio Cabinet Member	30 September 2022
Communities and Economic Development Cabinet Advisory Board	9 November 2022
Cabinet	17 November 2022

Recommendations

Officer / Committee recommendations as supported by the Portfolio Cabinet Member:

1. That Cabinet endorse the Tunbridge Wells Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) addendum.
2. Delegate to the Head of Economic Development & Property in liaison with the Cabinet Member for Tunbridge Wells Town and Local Areas and Cabinet Member for Rural Communities to approve any necessary minor changes to the REPF prior to submission, for the purpose of presentation or improving clarity.
3. Authorise the Head of Legal Services to complete all legal formalities, agreements, deeds and other documents as are necessary and/or incidental to the recommendations.

1. Introduction and Background

1.1 The Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) is part of the Government’s Levelling Up agenda and has been launched as an addendum to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF). The REPF fund was launched on 3 September with engagement sessions with local authorities during September. As with the UKSPF the REPF is an allocation and not a competition. Under the formula established by the Government Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (the Council) has been allocated £443,604.

1.2 The REPF is to run over two financial years 2023/24 – 2024/25 with the funding profile heavily weighted to the final year of the programme with 75% of the funding being available in the 2024/25 financial year. Funding can only be spent on capital (assets – building or equipment) and as an addendum to the UKSPF programme there is no budget for administration. The table below sets out the funding profile in each year.

	2023/24	2024/25	Total
Capital Allocation per year	£110,901	£332,703	£443,604

1.3 The REPF succeeds EU funding from LEADER and the Growth Programme which were part of the Rural Development Programme for England. The Council through the West Kent Partnership has run two successful LEADER programmes over the last 15 years.

1.4 The REPF supports the aims of the Government’s Levelling Up White Paper and Future Farming Programme. The objectives of the REPF sit within the UKSPF investment priorities for:

- Supporting Local Business
- Community and Place

1.5 As a result, the interventions, objectives, outputs and outcomes are mostly the same as the UKSPF however there are two additional interventions providing funding for small scale investment in micro and small enterprises in rural areas and rural circular economy projects.

1.6 Projects must be in a rural area. For REPF purposes, rural areas are:

- towns, villages and hamlets with populations below 10,000 and the wider countryside or

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- market or 'hub towns' with populations of up to 30,000 that serve their surrounding rural areas as centres of employment and in providing services.
- 1.7 The funding does not replace funding plans for rural areas under the UKSPF, rather it is a top-up to help address the extra needs and challenges facing rural areas. The REPF will provide capital funding to:
- support new and existing rural businesses to develop new products and facilities that will be of wider benefit to the local economy. This includes farm businesses looking to diversify income streams; and
 - support new and improved community infrastructure, providing essential community services and assets for local people and businesses to benefit the local economy.
- 1.8 REPF addendum submissions must be made to Government by 30 November 2022. Government will then assess the REPF submissions with approval anticipated in January 2023 and first payments to local authorities expected in April 2023.
- 1.9 As with UKSPF the role of the local authority will be to be responsible for deciding how to award grants. This includes:
- managing local project calls for selecting projects in line with approved plans
 - approving applications
 - contracting with successful applicants
 - making payments
 - day-to-day monitoring
- 1.10 It is expected that due diligence will be undertaken and that REPF beneficiaries will have robust business plans which demonstrate the predicted viability and success of projects. The Council will be responsible for ensuring that there is no duplication of funding. Projects that have had funding from other DEFRA schemes cannot be funded through the REPF. This includes:
- [The Farming in Protected Landscapes Programme](#)
 - [The Farming Investment Fund](#)
 - [The Platinum Jubilee Village Hall Improvement Grant Fund](#)
- 1.11 In addition, projects and costs where there is a statutory duty to provide them cannot be supported.

2 West Kent Approach

- 2.1 The Council intends split its REPF funding between the delivery of a specific green energy project in 2023/24 and in terms of its 2024/25 budget engage across West Kent building on the successful delivery of the West Kent LEADER Programmes between 2007-2013 and 2014-2020, it is proposed that the three West Kent

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authorities (Tunbridge Wells, Sevenoaks and Tonbridge & Malling) collaborate on the allocation and spend of their REPF funding (addendum to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund).

- 2.2 The West Kent-wide rural grants scheme be delivered in 2023/24 and 2024/25 that focuses on supporting both rural businesses and rural communities to deliver capital projects. TWBC will make its 2024/25 budget (75% of our pot) available for this joint West Kent working. The benefits of undertaking this approach are that:
- In an environment where public sector resources are stretched, running one grant scheme across West Kent as opposed to three separate schemes offers considerable efficiency savings. This is especially the case given that Government is not allowing any of this particular funding to be top sliced to cover administration costs.
 - There is considerable experience across the three local authorities of running rural grant programmes such as West Kent LEADER, especially within Sevenoaks District Council (who acted as the Accountable Body).
 - Aligning across West Kent will reduce potential confusion amongst prospective applicants, as the criteria and timing of calls for proposals will be uniform across the area.
- 2.3 Collaborating across West Kent does not mean that each local authority area will be throwing their funding into one pot for applicants to access. Instead, by ring-fencing the allocations given to each area, there will be no danger of funding allocated for one local authority going to a project elsewhere in West Kent. For information based on the Government funding formula Sevenoaks has been allocated £501,308 and Tonbridge & Malling £447,450. With both authorities working together in both 2023/24 and 2024/25 financial years.
- 2.4 In anticipating a replacement for LEADER the West Kent Partnership has a reserve budget for rural support which will be used for a co-ordinator (Rural Officer) to centrally manage the West Kent REPF approach across both years.
- 2.5 The West Kent approach would include regular calls for proposals, with information about the scheme, guidance notes and an application form accessible via a host page (with signposting via other local authority sites). Applications would be received centrally and assessed by the Rural Officer. The applications would be shared with the Economic Development Officers for any comments. Once comments have been received, the Rural Officer will then make a recommendation for each application to the panel.
- 2.6 The majority of the borough will be eligible. Whilst DEFRA is still to provide mapping to show the eligible rural area, it is envisaged that this will likely be similar to the previous West Kent LEADER programme, which included all of the borough except for the greater Royal Tunbridge Wells urban area. It is proposed that:
- Specific Infrastructure investment at the Weald Leisure Centre.

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- Wider grants awarded be a maximum of £25,000 (in line with FETF (Farming Equipment and Technology Fund) which is up to £25k) with a standard grant intervention level of up to 50% (that could rise to up to 80% in exceptional circumstances for community projects).
- This standard rate is higher than the 40% provided in the previous West Kent LEADER scheme as it is felt match-funding may be more challenging given the current difficult economic conditions. However, it will still ensure value for money.

2.7 The scheme would be promoted via:

- Local authority business networks and social media
- Parish Councils and Rural Borough Councillors
- Business representative organisations – NFU, KICC, FSB etc

2.8 It is proposed that the Panel should be based on the existing WK LEADER ELAG (Executive Local Action Group) and could include the following Members:

- Rural Business Representatives
- Action with Communities in Rural Kent
- Produced in Kent
- Kent Downs & High Weald AONBs
- A Cabinet Member representative from each local authority (SDC, TMBC and TWBC)
- KALC
- Visit Kent

2.9 The panel would consider all the applications and Rural Officer recommendations and allocate funding from ring-fenced local authority pots accordingly.

2.10 It is proposed that this REPF scheme follows a similar approach to the West Kent LEADER Programme, including interventions relating to both business and communities. However, in order for the scheme to be clear, simple and targeted (and easier to programme manage) it is suggested that the number of interventions is kept to a minimum, focussing on those that are slightly more general in scope. If initially focussing on too many different interventions (many of which seem to overlap), there would be far too many small pots per district to manage. Interventions can be reviewed during the process with alterations West Kent wide as appropriate.

Supporting Rural Business:

Intervention	Capital Grant Funding	Initial View
1.1	Small Scale Investment in Micro and Small Enterprises in Rural Areas	Supporting a wide range of small rural businesses (farm diversification, tourism, leisure etc) this is a good catch all intervention to provide cross-sectoral support.
1.2	Growing the Local Social Economy & Supporting Innovation	This has a narrow focus. Though could support a range of innovative community-based projects in our rural communities.

1.3	Developing and Promoting the Visitor Economy	Focussed on boosting rural tourism (even on a small-scale) and helping to build upon some initial collaborative work on tourism at a West Kent level.
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Supporting Rural Communities:

Intervention	Capital Grant Funding	Initial View
2.1	Investment and Support for Digital Infrastructure for Local Community Facilities	There are other pots of funding that are available that can be used to support tackling this issue (e.g. Project Gigabit). Could potentially use up a sizeable portion of the fund in its own right.
2.2	Investment in Capacity Building and Infrastructure Support for Local Civil Society and Community Groups.	This intervention lacks clarity as the indicative outputs all relate to community/green energy, but the examples provided in guidance are much broader.
2.3	Creation and Improvements to Local Rural Green Spaces	A number of fledgling Natural Flood Management and community green space improvement projects currently being developed. This could be a useful resource to support them.
2.4	Existing Cultural, Historic and Heritage Institutions that make up the Local Cultural Heritage Offer	Covering applications relating to a wide range of community facilities this provides a more 'general' intervention.
2.5	Local Arts, Cultural, Heritage and Creative Activities	Potential need for funding amongst local arts, culture and creative groups is likely to be revenue funding rather than capital. These organisations could be supported through intervention 2.4.
2.6	Active Travel Enhancements in the Local Area.	Support for an area that clearly needs investment in order to encourage better use of the countryside.
2.7	Rural Circular Economy Projects	Potential to enhance the 'sustainability' credentials of the programme. As an additional intervention introduced will sit well with DEFRA.
2.8	Impactful Volunteering and Social Action projects to develop Social and Human Capital in Local Places.	The benefit to projects of this type would seemingly be more revenue focussed rather than capital.

2.11 From an initial review at a West Kent level, it is suggested that the following Capital Grant Funding Interventions should be the initial focus of this scheme:

Supporting Rural Business

- 1.1 Small Scale Investment in Micro and Small Enterprises in Rural Areas
- 1.3 Developing and Promoting the Visitor Economy

Supporting Rural Communities

- 2.3 Creation and Improvements to Local Rural Green Spaces
- 2.4 Existing Cultural, Historic and Heritage Institutions that make up the Local Cultural Heritage Offer

- 2.6 Active Travel Enhancements in the Local Area.
- 2.7 Rural Circular Economy Projects
- 2.12 In addition to facilitate the specific infrastructure investment at the Weald Leisure Centre the Council will also focus in 2023/24 on this intervention:
 - 2.2 Investment in Capacity Building and Infrastructure Support for Local Civil Society and Community Groups.

Potential Outcomes and Outputs

Intervention	Output	Outcome
1.1	Number of businesses supported	Number of businesses experiencing growth
1.3	Number of businesses supported	Number of businesses increasing their turnover
2.2	Number of community energy projects funded	Improved perception of facilities
2.3	Amount of green or blue space created or improved	Increased footfall Increased visitor numbers
2.4	Number of organisations receiving grants	Increased footfall Increased visitor numbers
2.6	Amount of new or improved cycleways or paths	Improved perception of facilities or amenities.
2.7	Number of organisations receiving grants	Number of community-led programmes as a result of support

Funding Split:

- 2.13 It is proposed that the funding is split in the following way:

Intervention	2023/24		2024/25		Total	
1.1			15%	£66,540.60	15%	£66,540.60
1.3			20%	£88,720.80	20%	£88,720.80
2.2	25%	£110,901.00	0%	0.00	25%	£110,901.00
2.3			15%	£66,540.60	15%	£66,540.60
2.4			5%	£22,180.20	5%	£22,180.20
2.6			15%	£66,540.60	15%	£66,540.60
2.7			5%	£22,180.20	5%	£22,180.20
Total	25%	£110,901.00	75%	£332,703.00	100%	£443,604.00

- 2.14 A copy of the draft Rural England Prosperity Fund Addendum is attached as Appendix A. This sets out the rural challenges and opportunities alongside the proposed approach outlined in the report.

3 Options Considered

- 3.1 There are only a few options to consider related to the REPF. The first option is to manage the REPF directly, identifying and allocating additional Council financial resources to enable this to be managed and administered in house. The selection of interventions could then be focussed solely on Council requirements although in reality they would be along the lines of West Kent anyway.

- 3.2 The second option is to adopt a West Kent model as outlined in the report utilising resources already within West Kent to manage and administer the programme across the three authorities.
- 3.3 A potential third option is to not submit a proposal to REPF and miss out on the £443,604 allocated to the Council.

4 Preferred Option and Reason

- 4.1 The preferred option is for Cabinet to approve a West Kent wide REPF approach and the interventions outlined in the report enabling the REPF to be submitted by 30 November 2022. Submission by the due date will enable Government to consider and approve the plan releasing the investment for the Council over the next two years. While the period of engagement has been quite short the priorities identified are aligned with the Councils priorities and Focus on Five. The interventions that have been selected to provide some flexibility over the course of the REPF.

5 Consultation on Options

- 5.1 The period for detailed engagement has been very short given the REPF process. Through West Kent Partnership we have started to engage with businesses formally engaged in LEADER ELAG regarding the proposals and approach. As a result, engagement with groups and stakeholders has been more restricted than we would have wished.
- 5.2 Recommendation from Cabinet Advisory Board
- 5.3 The Communities and Economic Development Cabinet Advisory Board were consulted on 9 November. Comment from the Cabinet Advisory Board will be provided to Cabinet.

6 Implementation

- 6.1 On approval by Cabinet the REPF plan will be submitted to Government before the 30 November 2022 deadline. Formal response from Government on REPF is expected in January 2023. In the interim, the West Kent Panel would be established, initial year one promotion will be planned and systems set up so that an operational scheme is ready when Government approval is received.

7 Appendices and Background Documents

- Appendix A: TWBC REPF Plan

8 Cross Cutting Issues

A. Legal (including the Human Rights Act)

The granting of public subsidies to private enterprise is now regulated by the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (UK-EU TCA). The current “de minimis” threshold is £350,000 over a three-year period. It will be important to ensure the REPF funding as implemented adopts and follows the subsidy control rules in any payments to projects.

Internal rules relating to Grants and procurement (in line with the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 which remain in force) will also need to be followed.

Lucinda MacKenzie-Ingle, Team Leader, Contracts and Commissioning 17 October 2022

B. Finance and Other Resources

A budget of £443,603 has been allocated to Tunbridge Wells by Government to implement the REPF scheme. The release of this allocation is dependent upon the Council approving the REPF, delivering it to Government by 30 November 2022 and it subsequently being approved by them.

The allocation will be paid over two financial years commencing 2023/24 and will be paid in advance of expenditure. The projects in the REPF will need to demonstrate that there are either no ongoing costs beyond 2024/25 or that they can be funded from existing budgets.

While organised on a West Kent basis the Council will be expected to report expenditure on projects, along with their outputs and outcomes on a regular basis throughout the term of the scheme.

Report Author, 11 October 2022

C. Staffing

The REPF is proposed to be managed at a West Kent level. However, it will still need the Council to input staff time to the overall management and delivery of REPF. With no administration budget identified the West Kent approach will enable a small centrally held West Kent budget to provide a post to manage the programme with additional support from existing staff across all three authorities. The development, appraisal and approval of projects as well as managing payments to projects will be managed at a West Kent level. Resources will need to be reviewed on an annual basis; the project is expected to last two years.

Anita Lynch, HR Manager, 17 October 2022

D. Risk Management

Guidance published by the Government sets out the core criteria for the REPF scheme and as an addendum to the UKSPF scheme. The report sets out the responsibilities of the Council in managing the grant including the eligibility, delivery and monitoring process. Risks include over demand, capacity of staff to process and the manage the process in the timescales. Other risks include fraud however through a robust application process projects can be assessed before grant is distributed. West Kent has a successful record of managing and delivering LEADER over fifteen years and the REPF will build on these processes.

Report Author, 11 October 2022

E. Environment (inc. Biodiversity) and Sustainability

A Climate Emergency Impact Assessment was undertaken regarding the UKSPF. As an addendum an impact assessment had been carried out on the REPF. The interventions set out what is expected to be delivered but does not commit to the projects or delivery mechanism. Without identified projects and with the Council not directly responsible for the delivery, there are not direct carbon reduction benefits to the Council. However, the contribution by intervention to meeting the Council's climate emergency goals for the borough will be sought from project promoters in submissions for the funding over the two years. While it is expected that some interventions will be neutral, others will contribute positively to the wider borough goals. Project promoters will be asked to provide evidence of the longer-term sustainability.

Report Author, 11 October 2022

F. Community Safety

The REPF is an addendum to UKSPF and provides a broad spectrum of interventions including those related to community safety. Projects that are not specifically tailored to improve community safety are not expected to have a negative impact.

Report Author, 11 October 2022

G. Equalities

Under s.149 Equality Act 2010 (the "Public Sector Equality Duty") the Council should have regard to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited under the Act, advance equal opportunity and foster good relations between those that have relevant protected characteristics and persons who do not. The REPF identifies interventions at this stage and not individual projects. All project proposals in appraisal will review the assessment (EqIA) impact and whether they have a positive or neutral impact on the three aspects of the duty.

Report Author, 11 October 2022

H. Data Protection

There are no specific data protection issues related to the report in the approval of the REPF. West Kent and the three districts will put in place processes to manage the approval and distribution of the grant taking into account any personal data that is required to facilitate the process. In the establishment of the West Kent Panel and appointment of representatives the obligations related to data protection will be highlighted.

Report Author, 11 October 2022

I. Health and Safety

There are no specific health and safety issues related to the report and the approval of the REPF.

Report Author, 11 October 2022

J. Health and Wellbeing

The objectives of the REPF are outlined in the report which will help support health and wellbeing in the rural area.

Report Author, 11 October 2022

Appendix A

Rural England Prosperity Fund (Addendum to UKSPF Investment Plan)

Select your area:

Your area: Tunbridge Wells

Name of person submitting REPF information: Hilary Smith

Alternative contact name and email: David Candlin –

David.candlin@tunbridgewells.gov.uk

SRO Contact details: TBC

UKSPF Investment Plan reference number: TBC

Local context:

You have already submitted your UKSPF investment plan. Here, we would like you to provide any additional information about specific rural challenges, market failures, and opportunities for rural businesses or rural communities in your area that you would like us to consider.

Challenges:

1. Sizeable parts of West Kent are covered by Green Belt and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty – meaning higher thresholds need to be obtained in order to secure any growth and investment. This has often meant that existing rural businesses that are looking to expand locally are often constrained.
2. The impact of Covid-19 is still being felt within our rural areas – for example, DEFRA reports a 10% decline in national farm incomes between 2019 and 2020 and this is expected to have been even greater in 2021. The value of crop output in the West Kent area decreased from £90.4m (2019) to £88.8m in 2020, with a similar decrease in output from livestock.

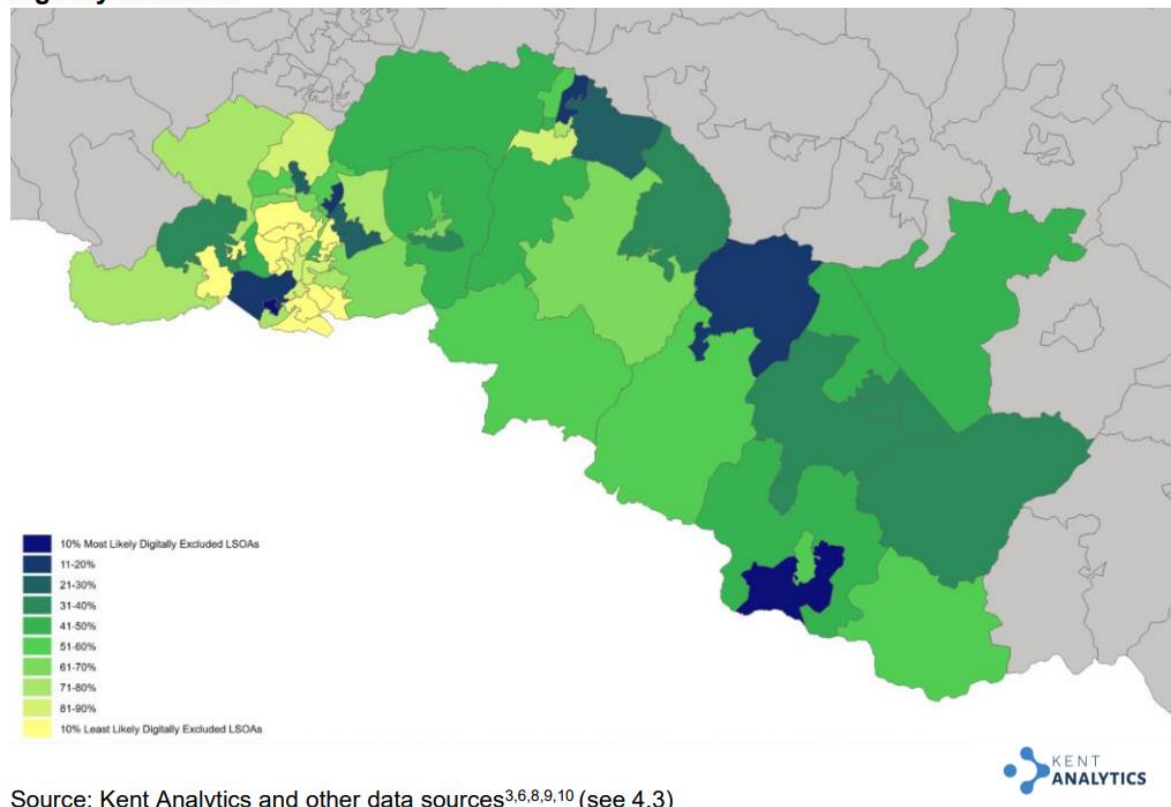
Covid-19 and the associated restrictions put in place to public health were particularly damaging to tourism and the visitor economy of Tunbridge Wells. The Tunbridge Wells Economic Impact of Tourism Study (2022) found that tourism related economic activity declined by 56% from £295,626,000 in 2019 to £130,171,000 in 2020.

Reversing this decline and addressing the long-term impacts of this loss of revenue are critical to revitalising the Tunbridge Wells visitor economy.

3. The challenges associated with Covid-19 are now being exacerbated by:
 - the war in Ukraine, and the associated energy crisis
 - the switch away from the Direct Payment System of subsidies for our rural sector.
 - changes in the labour market and the difficulties in attracting new workers into the rural sector

4. A number of our rural communities have very specific challenges associated with isolation and deprivation. This is illustrated by:
 - Digital Exclusion – from ‘Digital Exclusion in Tunbridge Wells’ (July 2021) it is clear the borough performs comparatively well compared to other areas in Kent. However, the report gives an overall representation and masks a number of rural challenges that exist in the Centre and East of the borough. When it comes to broadband speeds, there is a clear urban/rural divide between Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs), with urban LSOAs receiving an average broadband speed of 70.66Mbps and rural LSOAs receiving an average broadband speed of 40.10Mbps (the average broadband speed in the UK at the time of the report was 64 Mbps). These figures are considerably lower than in the other West Kent districts.

Figure 4. Map of the pattern of likely digital exclusion at LSOA level. The darker areas are those most likely to be digitally excluded and the lighter areas are those least likely to be digitally excluded.



- Connectivity and access to services:

Rural public transport services have been under considerable pressure in recent years, with reductions in some rural bus services having already happened, and ongoing consultation around further cuts to the subsidies required to ensure other bus services continue. These bus services are an essential part of tackling rural isolation, and for some are the key means through which they can access a host of services.

Rural community facilities have struggled to obtain funding for vital upkeep and renovations to ensure they continue to provide positive physical and mental health outcomes in isolated communities.

- The modernisation and decarbonisation of rural community sports and leisure facilities – rural communities are often isolated from community sports & leisure facilities, which is why the modernisation and decarbonisation of existing facilities is vital for their longer-term retention to enable ongoing engagement and outreach in the rural community delivering physical and mental health benefits.

Opportunities:

1. Environmental and landscape designations also present an opportunity to local communities to build upon the high-quality environment within which they live and to connect with their local landscape and wildlife in order to enhance their quality of life.
2. Ensure best practice in land management and promote sustainable development, especially building upon the work of the Growing Kent and Medway Initiative and other recent local projects and initiatives.
3. Diversification of rural activities with new revenue streams have the potential to be key to the success of rural areas, supported by improved transport infrastructure and the availability of affordable housing.
4. Encourage the development of local heritage and rural tourism-related businesses, particularly where projects support the local economy and create or sustain employment, in order to stimulate the rural visitor economy.
5. Revitalise Community Sports & Leisure facilities to reduce carbon emissions, extend the lifespan of the facility – and by extension boost physical and mental health and bring rural communities together.
6. Work with the County Council and broadband providers to tackle digital exclusion.

Interventions – rural business:

2023-24 interventions:

None

2024-25 interventions:

- 1.1 Capital Grant Funding for Small Scale Investment in Micro and Small Enterprises in Rural Areas
- 1.3 Capital Grant Funding for Developing and Promoting the Visitor Economy

Please explain how the interventions selected will address local rural business challenges, market failures, and opportunities (max 300 words)

With many rural businesses struggling at present due to current market conditions and the end of the LEADER programme, now is a good opportunity for supporting businesses in our

rural economy to undertake innovation and diversification that will enable resilience and ultimately foster growth.

Intervention 1.1 will enable direct funding support to our rural businesses that will:

- Enable a move towards measures that enable greater efficiency (that will help in meeting broader climate change resilience challenges through sustainability, but also labour market difficulties).
- Support innovation in their business, including new processes/technologies and routes to market.
- Encourage diversification in the rural economy that will prevent businesses being vulnerable to negative change in specific sectors.

Intervention 1.3 will help to strengthen the rural tourist economy. Whilst there are a number of well-known tourist attractions in the West Kent area, such as Scotney Castle and Sissinghurst Castle Gardens, much of the tourism sector is relatively small-scale and under-developed. There is therefore a good opportunity through this intervention to enhance this sector locally through the provision of direct financial support to help enhance tourism accommodation and destinations that will bring greater profile to West Kent and help to stimulate new visitor experiences.

Please rank the interventions selected in order of expected value added:

- 1.1 Capital Grant Funding for Small Scale Investment in Micro and Small Enterprises in Rural Areas
- 1.3 Capital Grant Funding for Developing and Promoting the Visitor Economy

Interventions – rural communities:

2023-24 interventions:

- 2.2 Capital grant funding for investment in capacity building and infrastructure support for local civil society and community groups

2024-25 interventions:

- 2.3 Capital Grant Funding for Creation and Improvements to Local Rural Green Spaces

- 2.4 Capital Grant Funding for Existing Cultural, Historic and Heritage Institutions that make up the Local Cultural Heritage Offer
- 2.6 Capital Grant Funding for Active Travel Enhancements in the Local Area.
- 2.7 Capital Grant Funding for Rural Circular Economy Projects.

Please explain how the interventions selected will address local rural community challenges, market failures, and opportunities (max 300 words)

The interventions selected will help to address a number of challenges, not least those related to rural isolation (which can also create health issues and a lack of a sense of belonging) and harness opportunities to connect with nature and foster a strong local identity.

Infrastructure support to deliver green energy – REPF funding will support infrastructure improvements at the Weald Leisure Centre in Cranbrook delivering decarbonisation to this significant rural facility. This will transform energy use in this facility for the rural area and east of the borough with the project delivering the installation of air source heat pumps (replacing the existing boilers) and further upgrades including improved insulation, LED lighting and solar panels.

Local Rural Green Spaces – projects that enhance our green spaces, especially community-led projects will help connect local people to their rural environment, encouraging ownership and developing a sense of pride in place. There are clear mental and physical health benefits in increasing access to beautiful outdoor spaces.

Local Cultural Heritage Offer – such projects will help develop a sense of community identity and a shared heritage that will mitigate against isolation, and in some instances, encourage volunteering in the community. Supporting local heritage assets will boost tourism, bringing visitors and investment to rural areas.

Active Travel Enhancements – not only improve accessibility and connectivity to surrounding areas, thus reducing isolation, but also encourages health benefits through walking and cycling, and when these activities are undertaken by groups (informal or organised) it also helps to create a sense of belonging and community.

Circular Economy – another intervention that helps to stimulate social interaction and also helps communities to appreciate the sustainability benefits of the circular economy. A recently established repair café in the borough is already becoming popular, albeit with

limited resources, and so support for this sort of activity would clearly meet a local need/interest.

Please rank the interventions selected in order of expected value added

- 2.2 Capital grant funding for investment in capacity building and infrastructure support for local civil society and community groups
- 2.4 Capital Grant Funding for Existing Cultural, Historic and Heritage Institutions that make up the Local Cultural Heritage Offer
- 2.3 Capital Grant Funding for Creation and Improvements to Local Rural Green Spaces
- 2.6 Capital Grant Funding for Active Travel Enhancements in the Local Area.
- 2.7 Capital Grant Funding for Rural Circular Economy Projects.

Intervention outcomes:

Please select what outcomes the interventions selected in the rural business investment priority are expected to achieve:

- Number of businesses experiencing growth (1.1)
- Number of businesses increasing their turnover (1.3)

Please select what outcomes the interventions selected in the rural communities investment priority are expected to achieve:

- Increased footfall (2.3)
- Increased visitor numbers (2.4)
- Increased perception of facilities or amenities (2.2; 2.6)
- Number of community-led programmes as a result of support (2.7)
- Number of community energy projects funded (2.2)

Delivery:

Please set out the indicative spend profile of your REPF allocation, additional to that of your UKSPF investment plan. Please detail the indicative budgets at investment priority level and at intervention level, for the 2 years of the fund, including if REPF money will be used to complement UKSPF funded projects. (300 words max)

Appendix A

The table below illustrates the indicative spend profile for the Tunbridge Wells REPF allocation, adhering to a 25/75% split between 2023/24 and 2024/25.

Investment Priority	Intervention	2023/24	2024/25	Total
Supporting Rural Business	1.1		£66,540.60	£66,540.60
	1.3		£88,720.80	£88,720.80
Supporting Rural Communities	2.2	£110,901.00	£0.00	£110,901.00
	2.3		£66,540.60	£66,540.60
	2.4		£22,180.20	£22,180.20
	2.6		£66,540.60	£66,540.60
	2.7		£22,180.20	£22,180.20
Total		£110,901.00	£332,703.00	£443,604.00

Table 1: REPF Indicative Spend Profile

From a Tunbridge Wells perspective, this REPF programme will be distinct from the remainder of the UKSPF programme as there are only two distinctly rural projects in our Investment Plan (Rural Heritage Placemaking; & Cranbrook & Sissinghurst Community Kitchen). However, there will be areas where UKSPF projects will add value to REPF. This includes:

- Community Grants Programme – will support the local community facilities and initiatives across the borough (including in rural areas).
- Rural Heritage Placemaking – will deliver funding to improve existing heritage assets in our rural areas. There could be a concentration of projects at significant heritage sites as this project closely aligns to our plans under intervention 2.4 of the REPF.
- Cranbrook & Sissinghurst Community Kitchen – links to the kind of projects highlighted as possibilities under REPF intervention 2.2. It will also combine with the Weald Leisure Centre improvements to boost local health outcomes in the Cranbrook & Sissinghurst locality.
- West Kent Business Support Programme – will help to provide intensive support to start-up and small businesses across West Kent. There could be useful cross-fertilisation between the REPF and this service in order to provide comprehensive support for rural start-ups and SMEs where appropriate.
- Support for the Visitor Economy – will support the visitor economy across the borough (including rural destinations), through marketing.

Please set out how you intend to select projects to support, detailing including how you will ensure they deliver value for money, including additionality. Please also set out how you will determine that projects cannot be funded by private finance. (500 words max)

Through the West Kent Partnership (Sevenoaks District, Tunbridge Wells Borough and Tonbridge & Malling Borough), the Rural England Prosperity Fund will be used for a rural grant scheme, along similar lines to the West Kent LEADER Programme which closed in 2021.

In addition to the focus of the programme aligning with the prospectus criteria and prioritising those interventions set out above, the following outline criteria will be employed:

- The majority of the borough will be eligible. Whilst DEFRA is still to provide mapping to show the eligible rural area, it is envisaged that this will likely be similar to the previous West Kent LEADER programme, which included all of the borough except for the greater Royal Tunbridge Wells urban area.
- Specific infrastructure investment at the Weald Leisure Centre.
- Grants (excluding the specific infrastructure investment) will be up to a maximum of £25,000 with a standard grant intervention level of up to 50% (that could rise to up to 80% in exceptional circumstances for community projects). This standard rate is higher than the 40% provided in the previous West Kent LEADER scheme as it is felt match-funding may be more challenging given the current difficult economic conditions. However, it will still ensure value for money.

The West Kent Partnership has identified a budget through which to employ a part-time Programme Officer to co-ordinate the programme and set up regular calls for proposals.

Information about the scheme, guidance notes and an application form (which will include questions on matters such as additionality and sustainability) will be accessible via a central host page, which will be signposted to from Local Authority sites. The scheme will also be promoted via:

- Local authority business networks and social media
- Parish Councils and rural Borough Councillors
- Rural Community Organisations, such as Action with Communities in Rural Kent.
- Business representative organisations, such as the National Farmers Union, Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce, and the Federation of Small Businesses.

The applications will be initially assessed centrally by a dedicated Programme Officer who would be funded by a West Kent Partnership rural reserve which has been a legacy of the

West Kent LEADER Programme. The applications will then be shared with Economic Development Officers from the three local authorities for any comments or further checks.

Once comments have been received, the Programme Officer will then make a recommendation on each application for the consideration of a grants panel. It is envisaged the panel would comprise the following Members:

- A Cabinet Member representative from each Local Authority (SDC, TMBC and TWBC)
- Rural Business Representatives
- Action with Communities in Rural Kent
- Produced in Kent
- Kent Downs & High Weald AONBs
- KALC
- Visit Kent

The panel would consider all the applications against the criteria and allocate funding from ring-fenced local authority pots accordingly. Applicants would then have a set amount of time (likely between 6-12 months) to deliver their project.

Have you identified opportunities to work with other places on specific interventions and/or projects for the rural business interventions?

Intervention(s) you intend to collaborate on: 1.1 and 1.3

Place(s) you intend to collaborate with: Sevenoaks District and Tonbridge & Malling Borough

Have you identified opportunities to work with other places on specific interventions and/or projects for the rural communities interventions?

Intervention(s) you intend to collaborate on: 2.3; 2.4; 2.6 and 2.7

Place(s) you intend to collaborate with: Sevenoaks District and Tonbridge & Malling Borough

Engagement:

Further to your UKSPF Investment Plan engagement, have you engaged or consulted with rural stakeholders, or expanded your UKSPF local partnership group, to inform

the information you have submitted above? If yes, please give details. You should also use this section to tell us about planned future engagement with rural stakeholders.

Collaboratively, the West Kent partners have engaged with local rural representatives to discuss outline proposals that had been pulled together by council officers. A focus group discussion took place on 17 October 2022 including representatives from the three local authorities and the West Kent Partnership, Kent Downs AONB, Action with Communities in Rural Kent, NIAB EMR, Hugh Lowe Farms, Hadlow Estate and Batcheller Monkhouse. The local rural representatives all have experience of overseeing LEADER programmes and projects, as well as providing insight into some of the challenges and opportunities in the rural area.

The main feedback from this focus group was:

- Overall the rural representatives were very positive about the proposal.
- A need to ensure that the process of applying is as simplified as possible (as the LEADER Programme was overly bureaucratic and put off a lot of smaller, newer businesses or community groups)
- A need for flexibility on the intervention rate in exceptional circumstances, particularly for community projects.

The intention is for the attendees of this focus group to participate in the grant panel for the programme, along with council representatives. As such, these rural stakeholders will have an ongoing role for the duration of the programme.

The proposals were also shared with the West Kent Partnership Board on 21 October 2022 and met with approval.

Are there aspects of your plans to use your REPF allocation that are not supported by rural stakeholders and the rural community? If yes, please provide more detail.

No

Are there MPs who are not supportive of your investment plan? If yes, please list which MPs are not supportive and outline their reasons why.

TBC

Confirmation of Approval:

Please provide the names of who has approved the submission of the additional information provided

Chief Executive: William Benson

Elected Leader: Cllr Ben Chapelard

Section 151 Officer: Lee Colyer