

# Rural England Prosperity Fund (Addendum to UKSPF Investment Plan)

**Select your area:**

**Your area:** Tunbridge Wells

**Name of person submitting REPF information:** Hilary Smith

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**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:

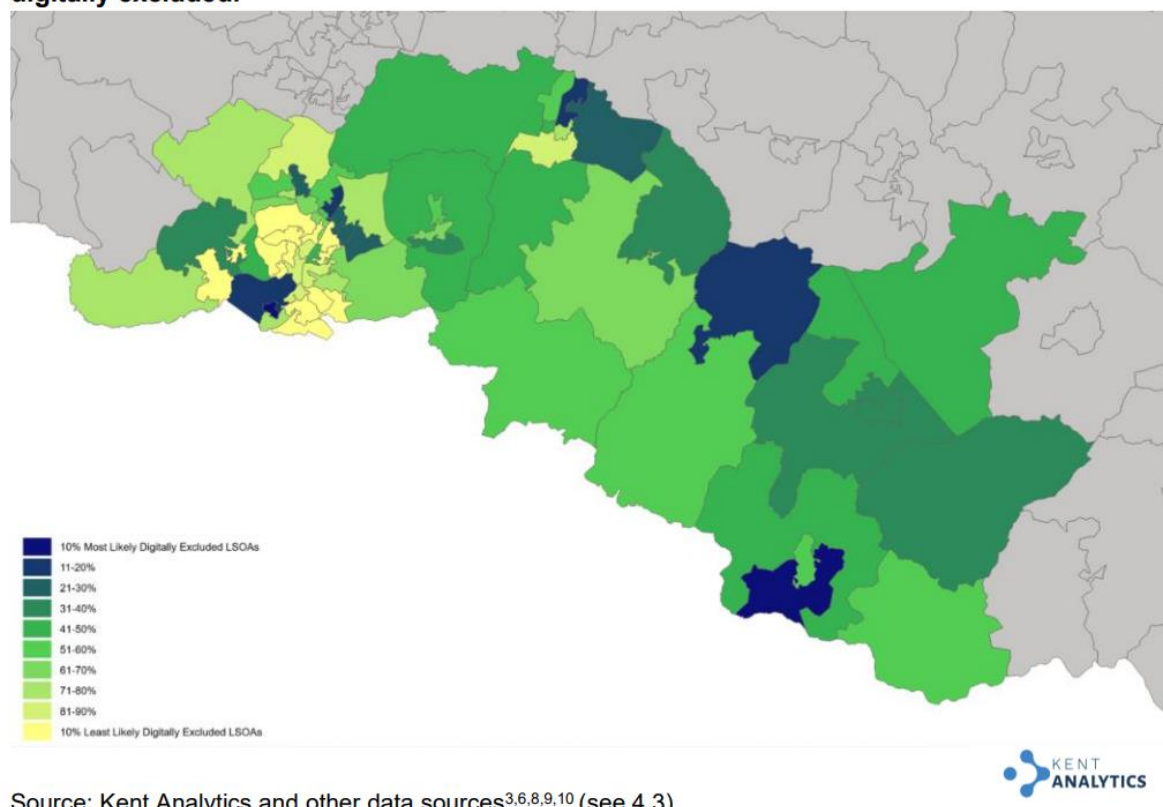
1. Sizeable parts of West Kent are covered by Green Belt and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty – meaning higher thresholds need to be obtained in order to secure any growth and investment. This has often meant that existing rural businesses that are looking to expand locally are often constrained.
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)**

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
<b>Total</b>		<b>£110,901.00</b>	<b>£332,703.00</b>	<b>£443,604.00</b>

**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