



WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

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| Name and date of Committee | EXECUTIVE – 11 JUNE 2025. |
| Subject | UPDATE ON RURAL ENGLAND PROSPERITY FUNDED PROJECTED SPEND FOR 2025/26 |
| Wards affected | All |
| Accountable member | Councillor Duncan Enright – Cabinet Member for Economic Development. Email: duncan.enright@westoxon.gov.uk |
| Accountable officer | Phil Martin – Director of Place Email: phil.martin@westoxon.gov.uk |
| Report author | Sam Stronach – Economic Development Manager Email: sam.stronach@westoxon.gov.uk |
| Summary/Purpose | To provide a report to the Executive on allocation for this final year of Rural England Prosperity Fund. |
| Annexes | None – further information can be found at: <u>Rural England Prosperity Fund: prospectus updates for 2025 to 2026 - GOV.UK</u> |
| Recommendation(s) | That the Executive resolves to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Note the report. 2. Delegate the approval of the grants outlined in the report to the Director of Place in consultation with the Executive Member for Economic Development |
| Corporate priorities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Putting Residents First • A Good Quality of Life for All • A Better Environment for People and Wildlife • Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency • Working Together for West Oxfordshire |

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|-----------------------------|---|
| Key Decision | NO |
| Exempt | NO |
| Consultees/ Consultation | <p>Consulted with the UKPSF Delivery Group that meets monthly and is attended by Cllr Duncan Enright.</p> <p>Consulted with the UKSPF Partnership Group that meets quarterly and is Chaired by Cllr Duncan Enright.</p> |

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

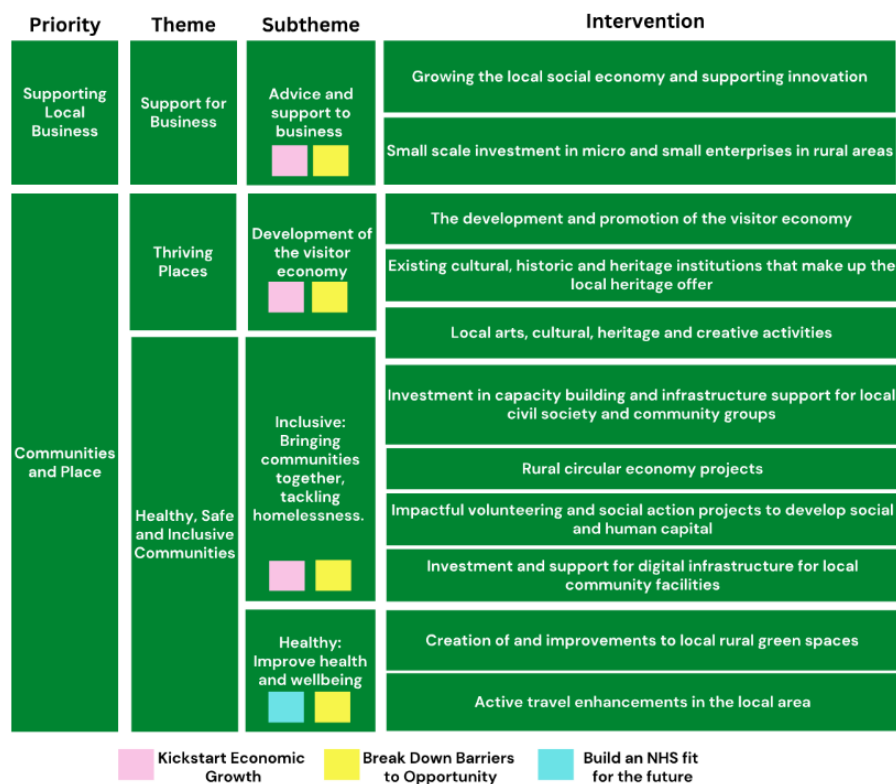
- 1.1 The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and Rural England's Prosperity Fund (REPF) were part of the previous Government's Levelling Up agenda. It provided £2.6 billion of new funding for local investment by March 2025, with all areas of the UK receiving an allocation. The primary goal of the UKSPF was to build pride in place and increase life chances across the UK through the support of high-quality skills training, improving pay, supporting employment and productivity growth.
- 1.2 Following the announcements of the final years UKSPF allocation. On 27th March 2025 we were advised that we would have a capital allocation from REPF for £214,829, specifically allocated for investment in physical assets or infrastructure that support rural economic development.
- 1.3 The UKSPF has mapped interventions into mission-led themes across priority areas. The REPF will support 2 of the 3 UKSPF investment priorities:
 - communities and place
 - supporting local businesses
- 1.4 Following a review with internal teams and the Executive Member for Economic Development. The UKSPF and REPF delivery group have identified projects that align with the priorities and offer outcomes and outputs that support the funding criteria but also Council priorities.
- 1.5 The funding deadline for all completed REPF projects will be 31st March 2026 , the same as UKSPF. This funding will not continue after this point but it is hoped there will be a new funding model in the future.

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Rural England's Prosperity Fund (REPF) is an additional fund released by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) that builds on and is complementary to UKSPF. REPF is applicable to two of the UKSPF themes; communities and place and support local business. It funds capital projects for small businesses and community infrastructure which help to strengthen the rural economy and rural communities.

3.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 Projects need to adhere to REPF investment priorities and the government's missions that meet local area priorities:



3.2 Following a review by internal teams—comprising members of the UKSPF Delivery Group and the Executive Member for Economic Development—the group identified projects and grant programmes that align with the REPF sub-themes. These projects have been categorised as follows:

| REP Sub-theme | Capital Allocation | % of Total | Project(s) | Lead Team |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|------------|---|----------------------|
| Improving Health and Wellbeing | £60,000.00 | 28% | Westhive Crowdfunding Platform | Communities |
| Development of the Visitor Economy | £75,000.00 | 35% | Visitor Economy Scheme | Tourism |
| Advice and Support to Business | £79,829.00 | 37% | Shop Front Improvement Grant Scheme & Rural Enterprise Growth Grant | Economic Development |
| Allocation 25/26 | £214,829.00 | | | |

3.3 All projects and grant programmes from REPF have to be completed and funding allocated before 31st May 2025. Our allocation also needed to be forecasted back to government before the 1st May 2025.

3.4 The Council has assessed the legal implications of individual projects and will ensure that they meet legal requirements, obtain relevant permissions and are procured and funded

appropriately. In securing UKSPF the Council must meet the requirements of the fund to avoid any repayment of the allocation. Grant agreements were put in place with grant recipients, which set out requirements for spending, deadlines and provision of evidence on completion.

- 3.5 The delivery of the UKSPF will be run as a Programme and managed through Publica's existing Project Management Framework to ensure compliance with fund requirements and other risks are identified and managed effectively. Save from the above, there are no other legal implications arising directly from this Report.

4.0 SUMMARY OF REPF PROJECTS FOR 2025/26

- 4.1 **Westhive (Community Infrastructure Fund)** – To align with the goals of the REPF, West Oxfordshire District Council's Council Plan, and the recommendations of the Plunkett Foundation's Rural Services Study, an allocation of £60,000 will be directed towards the Westhive crowdfunding platform to support community-led projects that help restore local pride, a sense of belonging, and community cohesion. Westhive places a strong emphasis on initiatives that support the most vulnerable residents and tackle exclusion in all its forms, whether due to mental health, financial hardship, or disability. Projects that engage with or are led by young people are especially encouraged.
- 4.2 This project meets the 'Communities and Place' subtheme with the opportunity to meet many of the interventions.
- 4.3 **Rural Visitor Economy Business Grant Scheme** – This grant scheme will be managed by the Tourism Team and is designed to support the growth and sustainability of the rural visitor economy in West Oxfordshire. It will focus on enabling rural tourism and hospitality businesses to enhance their offer, attract new and returning visitors, and adapt to changing customer expectations and environmental considerations. The scheme will provide targeted funding to help businesses invest in capital improvements such as infrastructure upgrades, improved accessibility, and sustainable practices that reduce environmental impact. By doing so, it aims to strengthen the resilience of the visitor economy and support job creation and sustainment in rural communities. This grant falls under the 'Support for the Visitor Economy' subtheme and has an allocation of £75,000, which will invite businesses to also match-fund to this.
- 4.4 **Rural Enterprise Growth Grant** -This grant scheme will be delivered by the Economic Development Team. The scheme is designed to support rural and agricultural businesses in West Oxfordshire to grow, diversify, and build resilience. It will particularly focus on reaching farming and agriculture-based enterprises. The aim is to drive growth and productivity within rural and farming sectors, support business diversification and the development of value-added agricultural activities, promote environmental sustainability and the adoption of low-carbon practices, and stimulate job creation to strengthen the rural workforce.
- 4.5 This grant falls under the 'Advice and Support to Business' sub-theme and has a total funding allocation of £64,829 with a match-funding requirement.
- 4.6 **Small Business Grant Scheme** Again, this grant scheme will be administered by the Economic Development Team. Last year's SBGS was very successful with 77 local SME's supported

with grants to overcome challenges, expand their operations, and create sustainable employment opportunities within the community. For this final year we are going to target businesses to ‘beautify’ and upgrade shop frontages, outside spaces, and seating areas. This grant scheme will be supported with £30,000 from UKSPF and £15,000 from REPF and a match-funding requirement by businesses.

- 4.7 This grants scheme supports the REPF subtheme of ‘Advice and support for Businesses’ but also could potentially support the subtheme ‘supporting the visitor economy’.

5.0 COMMUNICATING SUCCESS AND SHARED LEARNING

- 5.1 West Oxfordshire District Council’s UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund projects from 2022–2025 and 2025-2026 have delivered significant success, including grants to support small businesses, resulting in job creation, improved productivity, and innovation.
- 5.2 The Economic Development Team have now gone live with a web page to showcase all UKSPF and REPF-funded projects. The webpage highlights key achievements, case studies, and the positive impact on local businesses, communities, and skills development. It also serves as a platform for sharing learning and best practices, supporting transparency and encouraging wider engagement. Visitors will be able to explore the work of partner organisations, access resources, and find out how they can get involved in ongoing initiatives or future opportunities.
- 5.3 To ensure a strong reputation and positive PR for the Council, case studies have and will be developed to showcase the real-world impact of UKSPF and REPF-funded projects, highlighting success stories across business support, community initiatives, and skills development. The case studies will also be used in wider communications, with opportunities to involve the Executive Member for Economic Development in media pieces and promotional activity, reinforcing the Council’s commitment to delivering meaningful outcomes for West Oxfordshire. We continue to show transparency, celebrate success, and strengthen the Council’s profile locally and regionally.

6.0 DELEGATED AUTHORITY

- 6.1 On 13 July 2022, the Executive delegated authority for the award of contracts to deliver projects highlighted for delivery in 2022/23 to the Group Manager - Property and Regeneration in consultation with the S.151 Officer and the Cabinet Member for Economic Development.
- 6.2 Subsequent to this, 15 November 2023, the Executive resolved to delegate authority for the approval of future schemes and expenditure to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economic Development, in consultation with the Council’s UKSPF / REPF Delivery Group.
- 6.3 WODC’s UKSPF / REPF Delivery Group have been established since that request was made and its membership includes the Executive Director for Property and Regeneration, Executive Members for Economic Development, Communities Manager, Funding Officer, Market Towns Officer.

7.0 CONCLUSIONS

- 7.1 The final year of the Rural England Prosperity Fund presents a strategic opportunity to deliver capital investment that strengthens West Oxfordshire's rural economy and communities. Through targeted grant programmes—supporting community-led initiatives, the visitor economy, agricultural and small business resilience. The Council is aligning national investment priorities with local needs and ambitions.
- 7.2 The in-house delivery model enables direct engagement with businesses and community groups, ensuring funding is not only accessible but impactful. Together, these projects reflect a clear direction of travel: investing in place, supporting local enterprise, and building a more inclusive, sustainable rural economy. While this funding stream concludes in March 2026, the Council is committed to capturing learning, celebrating success, and advocating for future funding opportunities that continue to support rural prosperity.

8.0 RISK ASSESSMENT

- 8.1 There is a risk that if the Council does not spend the funds they will have to be returned to the government. While the Council's own funds are not at risk. There is potentially a reputational risk to the council should this happen and a lost opportunity for investment in the district.

9.0 EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 9.1 There are no specific equalities implications from this report.

10.0 CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 While the UKSPF and REPF programs are not focussed on climate and ecological issues, the Delivery Group recognises the importance of both, and projects that seem to address issues along with their core aims are encouraged.

11.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 11.1 Rural England Prosperity Fund: prospectus updates for 2025 can be found at: [Rural England Prosperity Fund: prospectus updates for 2025 to 2026 - GOV.UK](#)

(END)