



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and Date of Committee	EXECUTIVE – 15 NOVEMBER 2023
Subject	UK SHARED PROSPERITY FUND AND RURAL ENGLAND PROSPERITY FUND
Wards Affected	ALL
Accountable Member	Councillor Duncan Enright – Deputy Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Economic Development. Email: duncan.enright@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable Officer	Claire Locke – Assistant Director, Property and Regeneration. Email: claire.locke@publicagroup.uk
Report Author	Will Barton – Business Development Officer. Email: william.barton@westoxon.gov.uk
Purpose	To update the Executive of the progress on planning and delivery of the Council's UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund.
Annexes	Nil.
Recommendations	That the Executive Resolves to: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Note the progress on planning and delivery of the Council's UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund;2. 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.
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

Key Decision	NO
Exempt	NO

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) is part of the government's Levelling Up agenda. It provides £2.6 billion of new funding for local investment by March 2025, with all areas of the UK receiving an allocation from the Fund via a funding formula rather than a competition. The primary goal of the UKSPF is 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 UKSPF has three themes:
- communities and place;
 - supporting local business;
 - people and skills (which comes into effect from 2024/25 onwards).
- 1.3 The Rural England 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 supporting local business. It funds capital projects for small businesses and community infrastructure which will help to strengthen the rural economy and rural communities.
- 1.4 The Council's allocations are as follows:

	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	Total
UKSPF	£70,467	£140,935	£788,598	£1,000,000
REPF		£180,000	£536,216	£716,216

- 1.5 The Council submitted Investment Plans for both UKSPF and REPF to the Government setting out high level plans for how the funds would be used. These two schemes were reported to the WODC Executive on 13 July 2022 and 16 November 2022 respectively with authority delegated to the Executive Member for Economic Development and the Assistant Director for Property and Regeneration to approve the final Investment Plans before submission.
- 1.6 A governance structure to oversee WODC's UKSPF programme has been established as follows:
- 1.7 Delivery Group comprising WODC officers plus Executive members for Economic Development and Stronger Healthy Communities. This group meets monthly and makes operational decisions on the UKSPF / REPF programme.
- 1.8 Local Partnership Group comprising Delivery Group members plus external stakeholders from a range of organisations covering community development, business support and skills. This group meets every two months, acts as a 'critical friend' and offers strategic advice on our programme.
- 1.9 In addition, the Local Partnership established two working groups to help develop the business support and skills and people strands of the programme.

2. FIRST YEAR PROJECTS

2.1 The following five projects were included in the first year's plans (Financial year 2022/23):

2.2 Improvements to Accessibility to Deer Park South

2.2.1 This project to improve accessibility to the 'Deer Park South' area of green space is progressing well. Two new bridges have been installed over the Colwell Brook and footpath improvements are underway. A nature trail will be installed and local schools have been approached to involve the children in its design.

2.3 Town and Parish Council Biodiversity Works

2.3.1 Council officers are working with Wild Oxfordshire to update a biodiversity toolkit that will help parish and town councils to manage their land in nature-friendly ways. There will be three pilot projects in Asthall, Eynsham and Filkins & Broughton Poggs to demonstrate the toolkit in action and produce case studies to help other parishes.

2.4 Market Towns Study

2.4.1 The Council commissioned Heartflood to undertake a study of West Oxfordshire's market towns to help identify priority issues for UKSPF funding. The study recommended establishing town partnerships to identify detailed projects in each of the towns. The study also identified that wayfinding, signage and the promotion of towns to visitors were areas on which to focus. Whilst there is currently a lack of detail, officers are working with towns to establish partnerships and identifying specific projects as suggested.

2.5 Rural Services Study

2.5.1 The Council commissioned The Plunkett Foundation to undertake a study of rural services in the district and to identify ways in which the Council can support them. The key recommendations fall into three themes:

- Community outreach activity including the promotion of community-led or parish plans, raising of Assets of Community Value and incentivising the use of community buildings and churches as "host" facilities.
- Provision of funding and support including grant funding for community-run/community-owned businesses, advice and support for rural businesses focusing on energy efficiency and robust financial management and working with local support organisations to make sure that they have the capacity and skills to undertake their work.
- The promotion of match funding and other forms of finance including the Government's Community Ownership Fund

2.5.2 The Delivery Group has reviewed the recommendations including those that sit within the Council's existing services (primarily community outreach activity) and those that can be further supported by UKSPF / REPF, in particular funding and support. These recommendations have helped inform the scope of the Community Infrastructure Fund and are being incorporated into the Business Support strand of work, both of which are described in more detail later in this report.

2.6 Carterton Strategic Plan

2.7 The Council commissioned BE Group supported by Hyas to develop a Strategic Plan for Carterton. The consultants are currently engaging with a whole range of stakeholders as part of their work. This included a recent presentation and discussion with the Council's Executive members. This is a significant and important piece of work which will both help to inform the new Local Plan and also wider strategy and activity including future economic growth and town centre regeneration. The study is due to be completed in the new year and is likely to lead to further work in due course.

3. WORK UNDERWAY

3.1 A series of workstreams are currently underway for years two and three of the programme:

3.2 Community Infrastructure Fund

3.2.1 A Community Infrastructure Fund has been established and is live for applications on the Westhive crowdfunding platform. This fund, totalling £226,000, offers capital grants up to £20,000 to community projects. In meeting the aims of both the UKSPF and WODC's Council Plan and in line with the recommendations from the Plunkett's Rural Services Study, the fund is targeted towards projects run by community organisations that restore a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where these have been lost.

3.2.2 We are particularly encouraging projects that support the most vulnerable in our communities and which address exclusion for whatever reason (eg mental health, financial or disability) as well as those that meet the needs of young people and indeed projects run by young people. There is £40,000 available in the current financial year with the remainder available in 2024/25.

3.3 Support for Market Towns

3.3.1 There is £158,000 allocated for initiatives to help town centres. The main recommendation from the Market Town's Study referred to earlier was to form Town Partnerships in each of the towns to work up detailed priorities. This work is underway and at the time of writing the groups had met in Witney and Chipping Norton. Priorities agreed for Witney were:

- Long term strategic plan for the town
- Promotion of the town to increase footfall
- Improvements to wayfinding and signage

3.3.2 Priorities agreed for Chipping Norton were:

- Rejuvenating the weekly market
- Signage and wayfinding
- Street furniture and public realm

3.3.3 Both partnerships are undertaking detailed audits of signage and wayfinding issues. Officers from both planning and parking teams are involved to ensure any proposals will be acceptable in planning terms and also to tie up with the existing work to update car park signage.

3.3.4 In addition to the work stemming from the Market Towns Study, the Council is reviewing the regular weekly retail markets in Witney and Chipping Norton with a view to rejuvenating them. This will help to attract visitors and increase footfall in the town centres. This work will be reported to the Executive at a future meeting but is very closely aligned with the UKSPF town centre work.

3.4 Visitor Economy

3.4.1 A low level of revenue funding (£5,000) was earmarked for the development and promotion of the visitor economy. The Cotswolds Tourism team are using this to run an event called 'Local Connections' in early November. The event will bring together local accommodation providers with local producers and service providers and help them to make links, collaborate and enhance the local supply chain. Using more local suppliers will help improve the accommodation providers' offers, it will increase business for the local producers and ultimately help to reduce supply chain miles.

3.5 Business Grants

3.5.1 WODC's Investment Plans allocated £548,000 for capital business grants split between supporting the visitor economy, local social economy and small rural businesses. A desire to offer two levels of grants was identified early on and both the Delivery Group and Local Partnership have discussed grant levels and apportionment. The grants will initially be structured as follows:

- 77 x £5,000 grants = £385,000
- 8 x £20,000 grants = £160,000

3.5.2 This apportionment will be kept under review and may be adjusted based on demand.

3.5.3 A Small Business Grant Scheme will be launched in the new year and run over both this and the next financial year. The larger grant scheme will be launched in the next financial year, will involve a more rigorous application process and will require a proportion of match funding towards the project from the applicant.

3.5.4 The eligibility criteria for the grants will be wide but the promotion of the grants will in particular target businesses involved in the visitor economy (including retail), small rural businesses and social enterprises.

3.6 Business Support

3.6.1 A significant fund of £246,000 has been allocated for business support in 2024/25. Plans for the use of this funding are still being formed but part of this will pick up the Plunkett Report's recommendation for advice and support for rural businesses, focusing on energy efficiency and robust financial management.

3.6.2 Officers have received and are assessing a proposal from OxLEP for a West Oxfordshire Business Accelerator programme. This is a comprehensive package of support targeted at businesses with up to 20 staff from across all sectors, who have ambitions to grow.

3.6.3 In addition, the delivery group is keen to support start up businesses and young entrepreneurs, help businesses reduce their carbon footprint and offer further support for the visitor economy. All of these elements are being considered in the plans which will be reported in due course.

3.7 Encouraging Business Networking and Collaboration

3.7.1 The Investment Plan included a capital sum of £52,000 to “strengthening local entrepreneurial ecosystems and support businesses at all stages of their development to start, sustain, grow and innovate, including through local networks.” It is suggested these funds are used to adapt space so that it encourages co-working, networking and collaboration. Officers are looking at options to enhance communal areas at Elmfield for this purpose. This work is still at an early stage.

3.8 Skills and People

3.8.1 The Skills and People theme provides £295,000 in 2024/25 for two interventions:

- Funding for local skills needs
- Funding for green skills courses

3.8.2 Work to put schemes together for these strands is currently underway and has been informed by advice from the Skills Working Group which was established by the Local Partnership.

3.8.3 Following the group’s advice, the funding for local skills needs is going to focus on helping people struggling to get into employment to start that journey and hopefully progress into work. There will be an expression of interest round to identify an organisation(s) to undertake this work.

3.8.4 The green skills training will be targeted at existing businesses, particularly those that can play a part in the ‘retrofit’ sector. There is a short supply of both building assessors that can advise and design systems, and installers. The issue is that many of these businesses are already busy with conventional systems and do not have an incentive to train for renewable energy systems. The funding is likely to be used to incentivise businesses to take up the training. The training providers can use these businesses to market test their training courses and create case studies to market the courses commercially.

3.9 Delegated Authority

3.9.1 At its meeting on 13 July 2022, the Cabinet 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.

3.9.2 WODC’s UKSPF / REPF Delivery Group has been established since that request was made and its membership includes the Group Manager - Property and Regeneration, the S.151

Officer and the Executive Members for Economic Development and Stronger Healthy Communities. Delegated authority is requested to allow the UKSPF / REPF Delivery Group to approve future schemes and expenditure under WODC's UKSPF/REPF programme.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

4.1 Not Applicable.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The UKSPF and REPF funds are Government funds that were allocated to the Council specifically for this work. The Council should receive each year's allocation at the start of each financial year and has already received the funding for 2022/23 and 2023/24.

5.2 The funds have to be defrayed by the council in the corresponding financial year. All funding for the whole programme must be defrayed by 31 March 2025.

5.3 No council funds are involved in the programme.

6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 There are no legal implications arising directly from this report, but the Council will need to enter into formal Grant Funding Agreements with the recipients of the funding which will require support from the Legal Team.

7. RISK ASSESSMENT

7.1 There is a risk that if the funds are not spent by the Council they will have to be returned to the Government. While the Council's own funds are not at risk, there is a significant reputational risk to the council should this happen.

8. EQUALITIES IMPACT

8.1 There are no specific equalities implications from this report.

9. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

9.1 While the UKSPF and REPF programmes are not focussed on climate or ecological issues, the Delivery Group recognises the importance of both and projects that seek to address these issues along with their core aims are encouraged.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

10.1 None

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