

Rural England Prosperity Fund

Report of the Climate Emergency and Countryside Portfolio Holder

Recommended:

That the Rural England Prosperity Fund projects be incorporated within the Council's Capital Programme for 2023/24 and 2024/25.

SUMMARY:

- The Government's Rural England Prosperity Fund provides capital funding for rural business and rural communities.
- The report recommends that the Rural England Prosperity Fund projects identified in the report be incorporated within the Council's Capital Programme.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to recommend the incorporation of the potential grant, arising from the Rural England Prosperity Fund, of £514,097 for 2023/24 – 24/25 within the Council's Capital Programme.

2 Background

- 2.1 To complement the UK Shared Prosperity Fund the Government has launched the Rural England Prosperity Fund (Rural Fund) worth up to £110 million for 2023/24 and 2024/25. It is the domestic replacement for the European funded LEADER Programme used to support the development of rural economies. The rural fund was launched on 3 September with Councils required to submit an Investment Plan by 30 November in order to access their allocation. It is not a competitive process and no match funding is required to access the grant.
- 2.2 At the Cabinet on 26 October 2022 delegated approval was given, in consultation with relevant portfolio holders, to complete and submit the Council's Investment Plan. The submitted Investment Plan contained proposals which were consistent with Government guidance in that the fund would help:-
- To fund small scale investment in micro and small enterprises in rural areas, look to help support innovation and developing new business, and promoting the visitor economy.
 - To fund local arts, cultural, heritage and creative activities, improvements to local rural green spaces as well as supporting volunteering and social action projects.

- 2.3 The Borough's total allocation combined for the two years (2023/24 and 2024/25) is £514,097. This is broadly split 25% in the first year and 75% in the second. At the time of writing the Government have not confirmed the date for releasing the Rural Fund although it is understood that this is likely to be in late March/ April. Given the scale of the fund and in order to be in a position to make progress with those projects identified in the Investment Plan it is recommended that this fund is incorporated within the Capital Programme.

3 Corporate Objectives and Priorities

- 3.1 The projects contained within the Investment Plan reflect the objectives of the existing corporate plan (2019-2023) and complements the direction of the forth coming corporate plan. There is also a significant connection with the objectives of Council strategies including the Climate Emergency Action Plan and the adopted interim Economic Strategy.

4 Consultations/Communications

- 4.1 Prior to submission, a stakeholder engagement session was undertaken with those organisations who understand the local rural economy and our communities. This helped refine the projects contained within the Investment Plan.

5 Options

- 5.1 The option to consider is whether to incorporate the Rural Fund within the Capital Programme, or not.

6 Option Appraisal

- 6.1 The Rural Fund is for capital schemes and therefore the scope of impact is a significant one. It has the potential to benefit a wide breadth of projects that support our rural economy and rural communities. It is envisaged that the scale of the grants available to applicants will be relatively small. Therefore, incorporating the fund within the Capital Programme allows these grants to be released in a timely way and follows the same approach of other grants the Council issues. This is the preferred approach.

- 6.2 Not including the Rural Fund in the Capital Programme would mean that expenditure on action plan projects could not be committed.

7 Risk Management

- 7.1 An evaluation of the risks indicates that the existing controls in place mean that no significant risk have been identified at this time.

8 Resource Implications

- 8.1 The October 2022 Cabinet (para 8.1) report indicated that the funding allocation would be added to the Capital Programme once the Investment Plan is approved. At the time of writing the Investment Plan has not yet been approved. It is anticipated that confirmation will be received in late March/April. It is recommended that rather than wait for the confirmation and a future Council meeting later in the summer it would be expedient to seek Council's approval now.
- 8.2 If, for any reason, the action plan is not accepted in full, the amount of capital expenditure approved will be capped at the amount awarded. There is no net cost to the Council in making payments under the Rural Fund scheme.

9 Legal Implications

- 9.1 The recommended option will enable the grant funding to be spent in accordance with the grant scheme and approved Investment Plan.

10 Equality Issues

- 10.1 The EQIA has not identified any potential for discrimination or adverse impact and all opportunities to promote equality have and will be taken.

11 Other Issues

- 11.1 Ward/communities affected
- 11.1.1 All parts of the Borough can potentially benefit from the rural fund with the exception of the Andover wards where Government restrictions prevent the fund being used on market or 'hub' towns with a population exceeding 30,000.
- 11.2 Sustainability and addressing climate change.
- 11.2.1 This fund can support projects that help address Climate Change.

12 Conclusion and reasons for recommendation

- 12.1 The Rural Prosperity Fund is an opportunity to support rural business and communities. Whilst the outcome of the submitted Investment Plan is not known it is considered expedient to seek agreement to incorporate the fund within the Capital Programme in order to facilitate grant applications in a timely fashion.

Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)

Cabinet report of 26 October 2022 'Rural England Prosperity Fund' and minute number 276. [Cabinet 26 October 2022](#)

Confidentiality

It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) and can be made public.

No of Annexes:	0	File Ref:	N/A
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Report to:	Council	Date:	5 April 2023