

Agenda Item No:	8	
Committee:	Rural and Farming Executive Advisory Committee	
Date:	13th March 2024	
Report Title:	Rural England Prosperity Fund	

1 Summary

- 1.1 In 2023 the Government allocated Fenland £436k Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) for the two years 2023-2025.
- 1.2 REPF must be allocated for business or community/place purposes and used to fund capital projects such as a buildings or equipment.
- 1.3 The two-year REPF allocated for Fenland will be paid on an annual basis by DLUHC/DEFRA to the CPCA with all funding to be claimed by Fenland no later than March 31st, 2025.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 The Rural and Farming Executive Advisory Committee is requested to consider the report and make any recommendations to Cabinet.
- 2.2 To note that a further update report will be presented to the Rural and Farming Executive Advisory Committee

Wards Affected	All
Forward Plan Reference	
Portfolio Holder(s)	Cllr Ian Benney
Report Originator(s)	Anna Goodall, Assistant Director Simon Jackson, Economic Growth Manager
Contact Officer(s)	Dawn Caplin, Investment in Business Officer Phil Hughes, Head of Leisure Services
Background Papers	Rural England Shared Prosperity Fund: prospectus - GOV.UK (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rural-england-prosperity-fund-prospectus/rural-england-prosperity-fund-prospectus#Introduction)

Report:

1 BACKGROUND AND INTENDED OUTCOMES

- 1.1 The Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) builds on, and is complementary to, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF). The REPF is a top-up to the UKSPF and is available to eligible local authorities in England. It succeeds European Union funding from LEADER and the Growth Programme which were part of the Rural Development Programme for England.
- 1.2 The REPF objectives sit within the UK Shared Prosperity Fund investment priorities for:
- Supporting Local Business
 - Community and Place
- 1.2 The REPF provides 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. It also provides funding to support new and improved community infrastructure, providing essential community services and assets for local people and businesses to benefit the local economy.
- 1.3 The REPF sits alongside existing Defra schemes, including:
- The Farming in Protected Landscapes programme
 - The Farming Investment Fund
 - The Platinum Jubilee Village Hall Improvement Grant Fund
- 1.4 The Government has allocated £3.2m REPF for the four rural districts of Cambridgeshire over a two-year period commencing 2023/24. The allocation for Fenland is £436k with £109k in 2023/24 and £327k in 2024/25. The allocation is based on factors developed in line with the scheme objectives including the size of rural populations.
- 1.5 The two-year REPF allocation for Fenland is paid on an annual basis by DLUHC/DEFRA to the CPCA. In accordance with the standard CPCA Funding Agreement the District Council will claim in monthly arrears the funding for each of the projects delivered in Fenland from the CPCA.
- 1.6 The REPF in Fenland covers all the District except for Wisbech which is classed a non-rural urban location.
- 1.7 In 2023-24 the Council decided to allocate the whole of the 2023-24 REPF of £109,000 to the Supporting Local Business priority and a single project providing capital grants to rural businesses. The Council also decided that for 2024-25 the £327,000 be split equally between Supporting Local Business and Community/Place with each allocated £163.5k.

2 DELIVERY

2.1 In 2023-24 we supported 16 businesses and allocated £80,000 on UK Rural Prosperity grants. The remaining £29,000 of the 2023-24 budget will be carried over into 2024-25.

2.2 The funding has made a significant difference to the businesses receiving a grant for example, Bankside Nursery, Guyhirn;

- *The process of applying for the grant was simple and straight forward.*
- *I was fully supported for the entire process of applying.*
- *I was kept fully informed, and any questions were responded to very promptly.*
- *This grant will improve production, which will mean more British production rather than importing. Also securing hours for my current staff and creating more job opportunities.*

Joe Perry's Snooker & Pool Palace, Chatteris;

- *I found the process in applying for the UK Rural Prosperity Grant pretty straight forward and quite easy to understand.*
- *We received more than adequate support from Fenland District Council mainly due to Dawn Caplin who was a great help and support from beginning to end.*
- *We were fully always informed and kept updated with how things were going when we inquired.*
- *With this grant we were able to open the business in a far more professional way with the desired equipment (pool tables) at the very beginning and not having to make do until the business became more established. It enabled us to make a very good first and hopefully long lasting first impression.*

2.2 The Supporting Local Business grants programme in 2024-25 will deliver capital grants to an estimated 20 businesses and has allocated £163,500 towards the Fund.

2.3 The programme for 2024-25 will be the continuance of the Business Growth Grant Scheme currently being delivered in 2023-24. In consultation with the Council's Rural Executive Committee minor changes (highlighted below) have been made to the scheme's key features for 2024-25:

- A maximum grant of up to £10k per business (maximum £5k in 2023-24).
- Businesses will need to contribute a minimum of 50% towards the total cost of the project.
- Only businesses with between 2 and 20 employees will be eligible (minimum 3 employees in 2023-24).

- Only businesses located within the defined Fenland REPF area.
- Capital grants will be available for businesses to promote business growth and for the purchase of, for example, capital equipment, expansion of business premises and so on.

2.4 The criteria used in assessing applications for REPF includes:

- Projects that create and sustain rural jobs.
- The diversification of income streams.
- Certain types of rural businesses will receive priority including farming and tourism business.

2.5 The Business Grant Scheme will continue to be delivered by the Council's Economic Growth Team. The final decision on whether to support an application will be made by the Council's SPF Grants Team consisting of Officers from Finance, Audit, Communications and Economic Growth.

2.6 The Community/Place programme in 2024-25 allocated £163,500 will deliver three projects:

Project 1:

Funding for the improvement of green spaces and local cultural and creative activities

FDC manages and supports community cultural events throughout Fenland. An issue that hampers the viability of local events is the provision of electrical power. Running events in certain green spaces are more problematic due to a lack of electrical infrastructure.

REPF will provide £25,000 for the development of an electrical power supply into the Furrowfields open space in Chatteris. This infrastructure will allow facilitation of community events throughout the year and ensure that events remain viable as the expensive hire of large capacity portable generators will be unnecessary in the future.

Project 2:

Funding for the improvement of green spaces and local cultural and creative activities

Another community cultural event that requires improvements in electrical power is Whittlesey's Straw Bear and the Whittlesey Festival. Whilst these take place in the town, improvements to electrical infrastructure are required in the marketplace. Again, a budget of £25,000 has been allocated to facilitate these improvements.

These improvements will make running the events more viable due as large portable generators will no longer be needed allowing an increased number of community events to take place on the marketplace.

Project 3:

Setting up community-led repair cafes / maker spaces and Men's Sheds

There is a men's shed in Wisbech, but otherwise Fenland is a 'cold spot' on a map of this sort of community led facility. Community-led repair café's do not exist in Fenland and maker spaces are not available.

This project will improve the currently empty and unused space at Station Road Cemetery Chapel in March, converting it into two spaces that can be used by different community groups throughout the week. The space is close to the town centre and local housing and sits within the most special green space in Fenland.

This project will bring the community together to improve mental and physical health and strengthen the local community in March. The prospect of a community-led repair cafe will give life to the current empty buildings. The opportunity for community group sessions using the facility as a makerspace focussing on creativity and culture, will provide a unique opportunity to residents in the town.

To renovate the inside of the two chapel buildings - that have recently been repaired externally – and to then add in equipment to allow use of the spaces as a Shed and repair-café / maker space will utilise the rest of the REPF funding of £113,500.

3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 3.1 The REPF is a specific funding opportunity with no comparable alternative options. Acceptance of the funding provides an opportunity to deliver the outcomes specified in the REPF Prospectus. The CPCA's REPF Grant Funding Agreement is a requirement of receiving the funding and has been subject to appropriate legal oversight to ensure that Fenland District Council's position is adequately protected.

4 IMPLICATIONS

Legal Implications

- 4.1 The CPCA's REPF Grant Funding Agreement is a standard document and is fit for purpose from a legal perspective.

Financial Implications

- 4.2 The REPF is external funding that FDC has been successful in securing via the CPCA from Central Government and as such whilst FDC will be responsible for administering the various projects there are no significant implications for the FDC budget.

Equality Implications

- 4.3 All individual projects and services have been assessed to ensure equality of access, etc.

5 SCHEDULES

None