

Agenda Item No:	9	
Committee:	Cabinet	
Date:	20 November 2023	
Report Title:	Rural England Prosperity Fund	

1. Purpose / Summary

- 1.1 At the Cabinet meeting held on 17th July 2023 Members considered a report titled “Rural England Shared Prosperity Fund” (now referred to as Rural England Prosperity Fund) and agreed to recommend:

That for 2023-24 the RESPF monies should be allocated exclusively for business growth purposes. The split of the 2024-25 RESPF to be allocated between business growth and community and place and will be determined at a future meeting of the Cabinet.

- 1.2 The purpose of this report is to determine the split of the 2024-25 Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) between Business Growth and Community/Place and the associated projects, processes, decision making structures and grant funding agreements.

2. Key Issues

- 2.1 The allocation of REPF for Fenland is £436k with £109k in 2023-24 and £327k in 2024-25. The investment priorities for REPF are Business Growth and Community/Place with the focus in 2023-24 being on Business Growth.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 Cabinet is requested to consider and agree for 2024-25 that the REPF monies should be allocated equally between Business Growth and Community/Place and used as described in the report below in sections 1.8 to 1.14.

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)	Simon Jackson, Economic Growth Manager 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>)

Report:

1 BACKGROUND AND INTENDED OUTCOMES

- 1.1 As reported to Members on the 17th July Cabinet meeting, 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 only to eligible local authorities in England.
- 1.2 The REPF objectives sit within the UKSPF investment priorities for:
- Business Growth
 - Community and Place
- 1.3 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.
 - Support new and improved community infrastructure, providing essential community services and assets for local people and businesses to benefit the local economy.
- 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 Government allocation for Fenland is £436k with £109k in 2023/24 and £327k in 2024/25. The allocation is determined nationally by Government is based on factors developed in line with the scheme objectives including the size of rural populations.
- 1.5 The REPF in Fenland covers all the District except for Wisbech which is classed a non-rural urban location.
- 1.6 In 2023-24 the Council allocated the whole of the 2023-24 REPF of £109k to the Business Growth priority and a single project providing capital grants to rural businesses.
- 1.7 For 2024-25 it is recommended that the £327,000 be split equally between Business Growth and Community/Place with each allocated £163.5k.
- 1.8 Business Growth
- The project 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.

1.9 The criteria used in assessing applications for REPF will include:

- 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.

1.10 The Business Grant Scheme will continue to be delivered by the Council's Economic Growth Team. The grant decision making process will be advised by the North Cambridgeshire Place Development Board (PDB). The PDB is comprised of representatives from the local business community with the Council represented by the Leader and Chief Executive and the CPCA with officer representation. 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.

1.11 Community and Place

The Fund criteria are laid out within a prospectus and make it clear the interventions that Government will find acceptable for use of the REPF Communities and Place funding. These are all capital based and comprise:

- Digital infrastructure
- Investment in capacity building and infrastructure to support local community groups
- Funding for the improvement and creation of local rural green spaces
- Funding for existing institutions that make up the local cultural heritage offer.
- Funding for local arts, cultural, heritage and creative activities.
- Grants for active travel enhancements
- Grants for rural circular economy projects
- Grants to support volunteering and social action projects

The difficulty with delivering against this set of potential projects is that the funding is only for capital works – there is no revenue support to develop ongoing projects.

Recommended projects for the Communities / Place funding of £163,500

1.12 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.

It is recommended that the communities / place element of the REPF funds £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.

1.13 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 is required 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 market-place.

1.14 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 cover the rest of the REPF funding of £113,500.

2 CONSULTATION

2.1 Engagement with partners such as Cambridgeshire Acre, CPCA Growth Works, Growth HUB and the Start & Grow pilot has enabled external views and policies to be incorporated into the REPF Business Growth Grant scheme.

2.2 Community/Place

- The events team within Fenland Council, supported by the wider community groups that make the events happen in their community have highlighted the infrastructure required to allow these community events to continue to flourish.
- Specific consultation has not been undertaken at this point, but it is clear that Fenland is a 'cold spot' on the map in terms of community facilities such as a Men's Shed and maker spaces. Wisbech and Ramsey both have Men's Sheds set up, alongside many others surrounding Fenland. However, Wisbech is the single location within Fenland. Setting up a Shed and Maker Space / Community Led Repair Workshop in the town of March will transform a vacant community asset into a useful facility for the local community, supporting small businesses, mental health and overall community health. Shed's and maker spaces also have the opportunity to inspire young people and give them skills that are transferable into employment opportunities.

3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

Business Growth

3.1 An alternative option would be not involving the PDB in the process. The PDB is made up of representatives from the Fenland business community will bring expertise and experience in evaluating private sector business investments and will help to ensure the most effective use of the business sector REPF grant funding. This breadth of experience and expertise is not available within the Council.

3.2 Another option might be that the final decision is taken by a member or members rather than the Council's SPF Grants Team. The final decision on grant applications is an operational rather than strategic decision. The Leader of the Council sits on the PDB and contribute to its recommendations as to whether to support or otherwise each application.

Community/Place

3.3 The option of offering small, one-off grants to local creatives has been considered. However, the Fenland Culture Fund, offering just this sort of grant has recently been launched in collaboration with Arts Council England and the Arts Fund Raising and Philanthropy organisation.

- 3.4 The other potential workstreams for this project did not appear to offer the benefits that the recommended projects do for the local community.

4 IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Legal Implications

4.1.1 Authority has been given for Fenland District Council to enter into a Grant Funding Agreement with the CPCA who are passporting REPF central government funding from DLUHC/DEFRA.

4.1.2 In relation to the allocation of funding connected with REPF Business Growth Grant Scheme, it is important for the Council to ensure that a fair and proportionate process is in place to assist with the determination of applications. The process for undertaking initial and full assessments of those applications received are as set out on the 17th of July Cabinet report.

4.2 Financial Implications

4.2.1 It is currently being assumed that there will be no carry over of the REPF funds allocated for 2024-25 into 2025-26. Project managers are aware of this risk and have undertaken mitigating actions.

4.3 Equality Implications

4.3.1 All projects have been assessed to ensure equality of access, etc.

5 SCHEDULES

Schedule One – REPF Business Grant Fund Scheme

Schedule Two – REPF Community/Place background information

Schedule One – REPF Business Grant Fund Scheme

1. The REPF Business Grant Fund Scheme will provide access to pump-priming grant funding in Fenland for rural businesses to enable them to drive local economic growth, productivity, R&D, energy saving, business innovation and skills development to secure access to market opportunities and boost long-term skilled employment.
2. The project will support existing rural businesses with more than 2 and fewer than 20 employees.
3. The project will be managed by the District Council's Economic Growth Team (EGT) ensuring quick mobilisation of the project. The EGT has an extensive programme of engagement with Fenland businesses including one to one support for over 40 businesses per year.
4. Rural businesses will submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) form to the EGT for consideration. Once assessed using a standardised scoring process those applicants that exceed the scoring threshold will be invited to complete the full grant application form and will receive support to complete the form from the EGT.
5. Those businesses invited to complete a Full Application Form submitted into the EGT will be assessed and scored. Each Application Form will be supported by an Officer fully funded by the UKSPF Shared Prosperity Fund who will also ensure due diligence, supporting evidence has been provided, subsidy control has been reviewed, etc.
6. The grant decision making process will be advised by the North Cambridgeshire Place Development Board (PDB). The PDB is comprised of representatives from the local business community with the Council represented by the Leader and Chief Executive. 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.
7. A council cannot contract out its decision making to another body unless it is permitted by the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act. The decision on whether to support an application will be made by the Council's REPF Grants Team consisting of Officers from Finance, Audit and the Economic Growth Team. Decisions relating to the allocation of funding will be published on the Council's website in line with transparency requirements and the associated exemptions under Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.
8. As the PDB will have access to information about businesses that have applied for an REPF grant including potentially commercially sensitive data. The members of the PDB will be required to declare any conflicts of interest with any applicant business before the application is considered by the PDB. All applicants will be made aware of who comprises the PDB and what the application process is so that they can equally flag any potential concerns to the Council before their data is shared. The application pack will include a

privacy statement to ensure we are compliant with GDPR, transparent and how the data will be shared with others to assess and determine the application.

9. If an applicant is dissatisfied with the outcome, they can request a review of the decision. The review will be undertaken by a group of Council officers, including the Corporate Director and Chief Finance Officer (s151 officer) and the Monitoring Officer. This officer group may wish to consult with the Portfolio Holder for Economic Growth and Portfolio Holder for Finance on any complex decisions.
10. Grant requests up to a maximum of £10,000 will be considered. The requirement for a private sector match of at least 50% increases ownership by the applicant and increases the return on investment for the project.

Schedule Two – REPF Community/Place

Background information;

Men's Shed, Community-led repair cafes and Maker Spaces

What is a Men's Shed?

Men's Sheds (or Sheds) are similar to garden sheds – a place to pursue practical interests at leisure, to practice skills and enjoy making and mending. The difference is that garden sheds and their activities are often solitary in nature while Men's Sheds are the opposite. They're about social connections and friendship building, sharing skills and knowledge, and of course a lot of laughter.

Sheds are whatever the members (or Shedders as we call them) want them to be. Although labelled sheds, they often aren't sheds at all. They can be empty offices, portable cabin's, warehouses, garages, and in at least one case, a disused mortuary. Some Sheds are purpose built workshops, but they rarely start out that way. Many don't have premises at all in the beginning and instead form a group that meets regularly for the social connection, company and camaraderie until they can find somewhere to kit out with tools. Many Sheds get involved in community projects too – restoring village features, helping maintain parks and green spaces, and building things for schools, libraries and individuals in need.

Activities in Sheds vary greatly, but you can usually find woodworking, metalworking, repairing and restoring, electronics, model buildings or even car building in a typical Shed. Sheds typically attract older men, but many have younger members and women too. Whatever the activity, the essence of a Shed is not a building, but the connections and relationships between its members.

By now you've likely discovered that the Men's Shed concept started in Australia around 1999. It then spread to New Zealand, Ireland, the UK, Canada and, more recently, Europe and the USA with a total worldwide of around 2000 Sheds in 2020.

Sheds are mainly 'grassroots' community activities that come about in response to shared needs. These have mostly been for men to access tools, workbenches, skills and opportunities to make and mend in the company of others. Gardening, computing, electronics and other activities have been included according to members' interests. The UK Men's Sheds Association (UKMSA) regard a Shed as the group, whether or not it has a base for activity.

An alternative to grassroots, bottom-up development, is where an established organisation creates and takes full responsibility for a Shed as an additional part of its work. Occasionally, an organisation might provide one or more support functions to an independent Shed such as underwriting the finances or providing management services.

Sheds bring health benefits by encouraging physical and mental activity, and improved wellbeing by providing an enjoyable way to stay socially integrated in local

communities, by being creative, and learning or passing on skills. Whilst most Sheds are for men, about a third involve women. There are now also some all women Sheds.

Why are they needed?

For a long time research has shown the negative impact of loneliness and isolation on a person's health and wellbeing. Recently we have seen more evidence come to light that shows loneliness and isolation can be as hazardous to our health as obesity and excessive smoking. Surveys from mental health charities are finding that millions of people report feeling lonely on a daily basis.

Men typically find it more difficult to build social connections than women, and unlike women of a similar age, less older men have networks of friends and rarely share personal concerns about health and personal worries. It is not the case for all men, but for some, when retirement comes, it can feel like personal identity and purpose is lost. Men's Sheds can change all of that.

Sheds are about meeting like-minded people and having someone to share your worries with. They are about having fun, sharing skills and knowledge with like-minded people and gaining a renewed sense of purpose and belonging. As a by-product of all of that they reduce isolation and feelings of loneliness, they allow men to deal with mental health challenges more easily and remain independent, they rebuild communities and in many cases, they save men's lives.

What is a community-led repair café?

A repair café is a community initiative that bring together people with skills to repair and those who want items repaired. People are invited to bring their broken or damaged items for repair, and volunteers attempt to fix them. A repair café is a fun, social community event that values the expertise of volunteer craftspeople and helps to reduce waste and consumption. The majority of repair cafes are linked to the Repair Café Foundation. The international Repair Cafe movement kicked off in Amsterdam and now there are over a thousand Repair Cafes around the world. The Repair Café Foundation can provide a digital starter kit in return for a donation. The kit includes a manual of practical tips to assist in setting up a Repair Café, templates for posters and flyers as well as forms to cover liability and collect feedback from people who visit your Repair Café. For more information visit <https://repaircafe.org/en/>.

What is a makerspace?

Places and spaces where people come together to create and learn.

Who are makerspaces for?

Makerspaces are for everyone — kids and adults alike. They are spaces where everyone is both a learner and a teacher, contributing one another's discovery of critical thinking, creativity and problem-solving.

What makes a space a makerspace?

Makerspaces can be anything that creates a community of sharing ideas, resources and experience, and innovation.

- If all you have is cardboard, masking tape and scissors, you have a makerspace.
- Whether your space is full of tech or has no tech at all, you have a makerspace.
- Inside? Outside? It doesn't matter. Wherever you gather, you have a makerspace.
- What matters is helping people to explore themselves and to find shared interests within their community. The equipment, materials and space come second.

Creating makerspaces removes some of the barriers that exist, but ensuring the space is community led will lead to a viable long-term space.

Communities can adapt to incorporate new opportunities and technologies as they become available. This means that a makerspace can be truly accessible and exciting for everyone, helping young people learn the skills they need to be employable in the ever-changing world of work and for adults to pick up new hobbies or even retrain – all in a safe community space.