

## WEST LINDSEY DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the Meeting of the Concurrent Meeting of the Prosperous Communities and Corporate Policy and Resources Committees held in the Council Chamber - The Guildhall on 24 November 2022 commencing at 6.30 pm.

### **Present:**

**Prosperous Communities Committee** Councillor Owen Bierley (Vice-Chairman) – Concurrent Committee

Councillor Stephen Bunney  
Councillor Michael Devine  
Councillor Jane Ellis  
Councillor Ian Fleetwood  
Councillor John McNeill  
Councillor Mrs Angela Lawrence  
Councillor Jaime Oliver  
Councillor Roger Patterson  
Councillor Lesley Rollings  
Councillor Jim Snee  
Councillor Trevor Young

**Corporate Policy and Resources Committee** Councillor Mrs Anne Welburn (Chairman) – Concurrent Committee

Councillor Owen Bierley  
Councillor Matthew Boles  
Councillor Stephen Bunney  
Councillor Michael Devine  
Councillor Ian Fleetwood  
Councillor John McNeill  
Councillor Peter Morris  
Councillor Mandy Snee  
Councillor Jeff Summers  
Councillor Trevor Young

### **In Attendance:**

Ian Knowles	Chief Executive
Sally Grindrod-Smith	Director of Planning, Regeneration & Communities
Emma Foy	Director of Corporate Services and Section 151
James Makinson-Sanders	Economic Growth Team Manager
Katie Storr	Democratic Services & Elections Team Manager

### **Apologies:**

Councillor Liz Clews  
Councillor Mrs Tracey Coulson

Councillor Christopher Darcel  
Councillor Paul Howitt-Cowan  
Councillor Mrs Cordelia McCartney  
Councillor Mrs Jessie Milne  
Councillor Robert Waller

**Membership:**

**Prosperous Communities Committee**

Councillor Angela Lawrence substituting for Councillor Tracey Coulson  
Councillor Ian Fleetwood substituting for Councillor Jessie Milne

**Corporate Policy and Resources**

Councillor Peter Morris substituting for Councillor Bob Waller

**4 MEMBERS' DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

No Declarations of Interest were made at this stage of the meeting.

**5 PROCEDURE**

The adopted Procedure by which the Concurrent Meeting would be held was **NOTED**.

**6 RURAL ENGLAND PROSPERITY FUND**

Consideration was given to a report which provided Members with information regarding opportunities for West Lindsey District Council (WLDC) in respect of the Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF). The report further sought to update Members on the development of WLDCs submission to the Rural England Prosperity Fund, outlined the emerging challenges and opportunities identified through the Theory of Change and set out suggested interventions that could be funded through West Lindsey's' Rural Fund.

In support of the report the Director of Planning, Regeneration and Communities gave a short presentation to Members during which they were advised how the Rural England Prosperity Fund had been announced on 3 September 2022. The fund was a specific allocation made to "rural districts" only and West Lindsey had been notionally allocated £795,821 to be invested during the period 1 April 2023 - 31 March 2025.

The allocation of funding had taken account of an areas;

- rural population
- rural businesses and productivity
- the importance of farming in each authority area.

The allocation had to be used to address challenges that had been identified in rural areas

and which had been set out in the Government's prospectus, namely: -

- Lower productivity rates
- Poorer connectivity
- Poorer access to key services

It was noted these challenges had already been highlighted within the West Lindsey UK Shared Prosperity Fund Investment Plan (UKSPF), as important challenges for investment in 'Levelling Up' across the District

The rural fund objectives within the UKSPF investment priorities for "Community and Place" and "Supporting Local Businesses" had been used as the basis for the Council's REPF submission, given it was a requirement that the REPF must be aligned with the main UKSPF Investment Plan with two main investment areas identified.

- Supporting Rural Business
- Supporting Rural Communities

The REPF would provide 100% capital funding to:

- Support new and existing rural businesses to develop new products and facilities that would be of wider benefit to the local economy. This included 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.

In order to access the REPF an 'addendum' to the District Council's Investment Plan submission was required to be made to Government by 30 November 2022 and needed to include: -

- Local Context - demonstrating an understanding of specific challenges for rural communities and businesses.
- Interventions – selected from a list of options linked to UKSPF; and
- A delivery Plan setting out how and when interventions would be delivered.

West Lindsey's approach to the REPF was detailed in Section 3 of the report and Members noted that a "theory of change" had been developed to consider the challenges and market failures, together with the opportunities for improvement being experienced in rural communities across the District.

This had been strongly informed by the wide ranging and cross cutting engagement completed through the work on the main UKSPF as well as further engagement through this process. The approach adopted was recognised by Government as a good way of understanding the challenges and the opportunities in a local area.

Arising from this work, the identified challenges for the two priorities were detailed at Section 3.3 of the report and the opportunities for each, at Section 3.4.

Using the challenges developed through the UKSPF Investment Plan work and additional

analysis completed for the Rural Fund it was being proposed to Members that the West Lindsey investment should be focused on the following interventions from the prospectus:

### **Rural Communities**

2.1: capital grant funding for investment and support for digital infrastructure for local community facilities.

2.8 capital grant funding for impactful volunteering and social action projects to develop social and human capital in local places.

### **Rural Businesses**

1.1 capital grant funding for small scale investment in micro and small enterprises in rural areas.

It had been recognised that Members were keen to support local communities and as such it was being further suggested that the allocation would be split, 60% to support local communities and 40% to support rural businesses.

Given the REPF could also only be used for capital projects, internal funding already approved to support businesses within the Feasibility Fund would be used as a revenue match funding stream for the rural business intervention.

The Feasibility Fund reserve had a balance of £150,000 which had previously been approved to support the growth of business, by offering grant funding which would facilitate the creation of new jobs and economic activity across the District. As there has been little interest/demand in the past three years, it was being proposed that the £150,000 in the reserve could be repurposed and utilised as match funding for the rural business intervention to support businesses with revenue costs.

Intervention 1.1 would be delivered as an extension to 'Project 2.1: Flagship West Lindsey Business Support Programme' in the initial UK SPF Investment Plan.

The grant stream would enable increased funding for rural businesses and farms to invest in new capital assets, innovative technologies, and infrastructure. Examples of such were set out at Section 3.7 of the report and Section 3.9 detailed the projected outcomes.

Interventions 2.1 and 2.8 would be delivered as an extension to 'Project 1.1. Flagship Community Grant Programme' in the initial UK SPF Investment Plan. This would provide a capital grant stream as part of the wider investment in capacity building and infrastructure support for local civil societies and community groups including Capital grants for the provision of gigabyte capable digital infrastructure at rural hubs for community use e.g

- Village Halls
- Pubs
- Post Offices
- And Capital grants for investment in projects that enhance physical, cultural and social ties and amenities e.g
- Community infrastructure

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- Local green space
- Community led projects

The benefits and projected outcomes of such were detailed at Sections 3.13-3.15.

In concluding the monitoring, evaluation and next steps, if approved, as detailed at Sections 5 and 6, were outlined to the Committee.

Debate ensued and Members from across the Chamber supported the selected interventions. In responding to questions around the administration costs, the use of the reserve and whether Members would be involved in determining grant applications, the Committee were advised that the REPF, given its capital nature there was no provision for administration costs however up to 4% of the main UK shared prosperity fund could be used to support administration and a programme officer, to help with the monitoring and management across the Fund would be appointed.

In terms of the £150,00 feasibility fund previously agreed, the Scheme hadn't seen the taken up expected and the reasoning for this was outlined. It had proved very difficult for businesses to access what were arguably quite small grants. Listening to feedback from the business community and a recognition by Members that it was challenging for businesses to access grant funding, particularly capital grant funding, without some support to develop those proposals. It had therefore been considered sensible to realign the Feasibility Fund with the opportunity of this capital funding, enabling access.

Finally, it was confirmed the Community Grant element would operate in a very similar way to how the Councillor match funding grant operated at the moment with a panel of Members. Members would be able to engage through the Grant Panel in terms of monitoring. A variety of methods would be used to feedback to Members including the Members' Newsletter, as well as the financial monitoring arrangements already in place.

Whilst Members were grateful for the £700,000+ it was suggested that the Council should be lobbying for more support for rural communities given the scale of the challenge rural communities faced with accessibility, particularly in respect of limited broadband in some areas. The withdrawal of/ changes to the Government gigabyte scheme left some rural communities and rural businesses severely disadvantaged. Acknowledging this was capital funding, to ensure sustainability, it was suggested that some additional revenue funding and support would be required to ensure any schemes established worked, were useable and actually brought about the digitalisation of rural communities and to tackle isolation.

In responding Officers advised that the Prospectus and Government guidance required the Council to ensure any activities aligned with the Government's gigabyte Programme and that was something that would need to be worked through as the Business Case, which would be approved by Members, was developed. With regard to revenue support, Officers reminded Members of how it had been agreed to invest the main shared prosperity fund to support our communities, to deliver support that would maximise how the capital investment was used, twin tracking and aligning those investment streams to ensure the best use of capital, again something that would become clearer as Business Cases for each were developed.

The Chief Executive offered re-assurance and whilst acknowledging this was capital funding

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It was recognised that the Council would likely need to work with, for example local parishes, as to what on-going support looked like. Referencing previous difficulties, in trying to secure additional funding for such purposes (broadband) outside of the BDUK programme, and how the Government had previously prevented this, the Chief Executive welcomed this funding and was hopeful it could be used to assist all residents in overcoming the difficulties they had experienced.

Several Members supported the comments about access to broadband in rural communities and sought assurance that funding could be wider than village halls, or that village halls, owned by churches were not disadvantaged as they had been with Covid Grants. There were also shared concerns that £800,000 over two years for such a large sparsely populated District was actually not a lot of funding. Members sought indication as to how the message would be spread and outcomes monitored, acknowledging there were numerous micro businesses, which likely had little interaction with the Council. There were concerns that some businesses were struggling to survive the next few months and as such time was of the essence and the money needed to be directly injected into businesses.

In responding, in terms of scale and how achievable the delivery was, one element that the Council would be required to undertake was monitoring and evaluation. Officers considered they hadn't been overly ambitious in the initial estimation of outputs across the programme. In some areas it would be a pilot in nature to test how the Council could intervene and what was deliverable. There were real opportunities to link into the developing monitoring evaluation framework for the levelling up programme, linking back to the Corporate Plan, and an opportunity to improve the skills of the organisation in capturing and understanding outcomes and outputs from investment.

Reassurance was offered that Officers had taken considerable time to consider the language used in the interventions within the Prospectus. The digital infrastructure intervention related specifically to local community facilities, with no definition of a village hall (very different to Covid Grant Fund guidance) and it did specifically reference places the Government considered to be "hubs" such as pubs and post offices.

Regarding business engagement, it was acknowledged this was a daily challenge faced and Officers outlined some of the current thinking, including leveraging existing contacts such as the Barclays Eagle lab at the Riseholme University, using existing relationships with organisations like the Federation of Small Businesses, as well as established networks and E-Briefings. It was considered one advantage out of the pandemic was that businesses knew more about the services that councils offered and the Council were much more on businesses' radars.

Members again welcomed the Rural funding, speaking at length of how rural communities often lost out to larger cities, regardless of need, and it also complemented the investment and funding received for Gainsborough.

In responding to comments about small business and local communities needing revenue funding, and how the reliance on local volunteers was often a barrier, Officers advised it was not envisaged the funding could be used for example to allow people to employ staff to drive businesses and projects forward, but would be about helping them to understand options around sustainability, create business cases and think through how to make those sustainable rather than parachuting in revenue funding for that purpose. It was

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also stressed that investment in community buildings would be in arrangement and agreement with the organisation that owned a property. The role of, for example Parish Councils, and them having an uncapped precept, which would allow them to support local initiatives they wanted to see in local communities. Whilst the District Council might be able to put in the initial investment and a small amount of initial support to get things up and running, there would be an expectation that local Parish Councils would be best placed to support that on an ongoing basis, given their ability to raise funds, but again through agreements.

In responding to further comments, it was clarified that it was not envisaged any funding would wholly fund a project but would act as a kick start, and ensuring maximisation of funding. It was envisaged if the Council could demonstrate the outcomes and outputs achieved it would open doors for being able to apply and secure furthering funding. It was acknowledged this was not a huge amount of funding, but it did present District Councils with the opportunity to demonstrate what could be done and it was a unique type of fund given the Government's previous stance, and was possibly being used as a pilot by them to change the way District's could access funding in the future.

In responding to comments about potential cross cutting projects, and making applications as easy as possible, the Chairman reminded the Committee that such points would be addressed later into the project, should the District Council be given the "green light" to access the funds, which was the purpose of the addendum submission and the evening's meeting.

Having had lengthy and detailed debate, with all recommendations having been moved and seconded, the Prosperous Communities Committee's recommendations were put to the vote.

In accordance with the concurrent procedure, following an alphabetical roll call, with a total of 12 votes cast in favour, and with no votes against or abstentions it was

**RESOLVED** that:-

- (a) the interventions set out at 3.5 be approved as the focus for the West Lindsey Rural England Prosperity Fund.
- (b) it be **RECOMMENDED** to the Corporate Policy and Resources Committee that the submission of the Rural England Fund Addendum as attached at Appendix 1 to the report, be approved.

Corporate Policy and Resources Committee confirmed they were content to move straight to the vote on their respective recommendation.

Again, in accordance with the concurrent procedure, following an alphabetical roll call, with a total of 11 votes cast in favour, and with no votes against or abstentions it was

**RESOLVED** that the recommendation from the Prosperous Communities Committee **be accepted** and the Rural Fund Addendum be approved for submission by 30<sup>th</sup> November, with Delegated Authority granted to the Chief

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Executive in consultation with the Chairman of the Corporate Policy and Resources Committee to make any housekeeping amendments

The meeting concluded at 7.22 pm.

Chairman