

Cabinet

03 March 2025

Part 1 - Public

Executive Key Decision



Cabinet Member

Cllr Robin Betts

Responsible Officer

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Report Author

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UK Shared Prosperity Fund 2025/26

1 Summary and Purpose of Report

- 1.1 Following an announcement by Government in December 2024, this report sets out proposals for the allocation of UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) for 2025/26.

2 Corporate Strategy Priority Area

- 2.1 'Investing in our local economic to help support residents and businesses and foster sustainable growth' and 'Sustaining a borough which cares for the Environment'.
- 2.2 Whilst the proposed programme has the potential to have a positive bearing on all four priority areas within the Corporate Strategy 2023-2027, its impact will be most acutely felt on the priority areas relating to the economy and the environment due to support for initiatives such as the Green Business Grant Scheme, Leisure Centre Carbon Descent Plans and Tonbridge Town Centre Regeneration.

3 Recommendations

- 3.1 That the proposed UKSPF Programme for 2025/26 as set out in Table 1 **BE APPROVED**.
- 3.2 That delegated authority to the Strategic Economic Regeneration Manager, in liaison with the Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Regeneration and Property, **BE APPROVED** to make minor amendments to the programme that may be needed in the event of project underspend.

- 3.3 That the use of any additional Rural England Prosperity Fund for 2025/26 (to be confirmed) for further rounds of the West Kent Rural Grants Scheme **BE APPROVED.**

4 Introduction and Background

- 4.1 In the Autumn Budget, the Government stated that the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) would continue for a 12-month period from April 2025 to March 2026, but with reduced funding of £900m (a £600m reduction in comparison to 2024/25). However, beyond these headlines, it was not clear at the time how this would translate down to individual area-based allocations.
- 4.2 On 13 December 2024, the Government released details of the UKSPF methodology and allocations for a one-year transition period covering the 2025/26 financial year. This new methodology has led to a higher percentage of available funding going to City Regions, but despite this all parts of the UK will continue to receive some UKSPF funding.
- 4.3 Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council has been allocated a sum of £327,146, comprising £60,401 Capital and £266,745 Revenue. This is the minimum allocation, and is similar to the majority of Kent lower-tier authorities.
- 4.4 At the time of writing this report, no announcement has yet been made regarding a further year of Rural England Prosperity Fund.

5 Proposal

- 5.1 Having received the announcement from the Autumn Budget, some initial (and potentially abortive) planning was undertaken to consider how any future UKSPF allocation could be spent. This was undertaken in the expectation that deadlines would be very tight once a specific allocation was announced.
- 5.2 On 14 November 2024, the T&M UKSPF Local Group (comprising the Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Regeneration and Property, and external partners) convened to discuss progress on the 2024/25 allocation, as well as agree some principles for 2025/26 should funding be made available. The principles that were agreed were:
- Given the tight timescales, don't start anything new – **continuation** of existing initiatives that have worked well or have the potential to deliver over a longer period of time.
 - Consideration of **strategic fit/spending commitments** – especially with regards the emphasis on supporting the Community and addressing Climate Change aspirations.
 - Delivery of projects that **avoid an unbudgeted ongoing revenue commitment.**
 - Ensure that the programme **provides benefits fairly across the borough.**

- 5.3 Given the level of partnership working in the existing UKSPF Programme, initial discussions have also been had with West Kent Partners, which indicate that there is an appetite for continued collaboration on business support (subject to obtaining the necessary approvals).
- 5.4 Based on a total budget of £327,146, **Table 1** outlines a proposal for a programme of activity in 2025/26. It aims to take a balanced approach, aiming to deliver under each of the three UKSPF priorities, whilst at the same time allocating funding towards our own strategic priorities, such as Tonbridge Town Centre Regeneration and Carbon Descent Plans, and delivering considerable tangible benefits to our communities.

Table 1: Overview of Proposed Programme for 2025/26

UKSPF Priority	UKSPF Theme	Project	Description	Capital	Revenue	Total
Communities and Place	Healthy, Safe and Inclusive Communities	Youth Provision	Maintaining outreach and summer programme work.		£18,000	£18,000
	Healthy, Safe and Inclusive Communities	Mobile CCTV	Continuation of scheme – funding to move cameras		£4,000	£4,000
	Healthy, Safe and Inclusive Communities	Community Enforcement Team	Set-up of a Community Enforcement Team to tackle ASB.		£45,000	£45,000
	Healthy, Safe and Inclusive Communities	Community Development Grant Scheme	A further round of the popular Community Grants Scheme.		£76,660	£76,660
	Thriving Places	Tonbridge Town Centre Regeneration	Contribution towards regeneration plans		£30,000	£30,000
			Riverside Walk lighting scheme plans		£20,000	£20,000
	Thriving Places	Carbon Descent Plans	Ongoing capital work at our leisure centres.	£30,000		£30,000
Supporting Local Business	Support for Business – Business Sites and Premises	Green Business Grant Scheme	Round 5 of the scheme to support organisations to reduce emissions	£30,401		£30,401
	Support for Business – Advice and Support	West Kent Business Support Programme	Funding covering mentoring support and events (including Expo 26)		£25,000	£25,000
People and Skills	Employability – towards and into employment	People and Skills Fund	Round 2 of scheme to support people closer to employment		£35,000	£35,000
Man & Admin	N/A		If at 4%		£13,085	£13,085
Total				£60,401	£266,745	£327,146

5.5 The following provides some background to each of the proposed projects in the programme:

Youth Provision – has been successfully delivered by the Community Safety Partnership for the past 2.5 years using UKSPF funding. During this time, a range of outreach work and diversionary activities has engaged over 1,100 young people in the borough, with a focus on Snodland, Trench and East Malling.

Mobile CCTV – using UKSPF funding, cameras were purchased in 2023 and these have been moved to various anti-social behaviour hot-spots across the borough since. This funding would cover the cost of moving the cameras around on a regular basis to capture and deter anti-social behaviour.

Community Enforcement Team – having been piloted during 2024/25, it is proposed that the work of the Community Enforcement Team is part-funded using UKSPF for a six-month period from May-October 2025 to match-fund against funding from Parish Councils.

Community Development Grant Scheme – having been run during 2023 and 2024 using UKSPF, this scheme has proved to be very popular, funding 43 community initiatives across the borough.

Tonbridge Town Centre Regeneration – UKSPF has been used to help part-fund work on this corporate priority over the past three years, and it is proposed that this continue given the importance of the work. Given the requirement to proceed at pace, it is also proposed that a contribution from UKSPF be used to provide funding towards the Riverside Walk Lighting Scheme plans.

Carbon Descent Plans – in 2024/25, £123,000 of UKSPF has been used to undertake improvements at Larkfield Leisure Centre. However, given the level of funding commitment required to deliver descent plans across our leisure facilities, it is proposed that a further allocation is put towards this initiative.

Green Business Grant Scheme – UKSPF was used during 2023 and 2024 to deliver a couple of rounds of this scheme which aims to support local businesses/organisations to lower their carbon emissions. These two rounds supported a total of 19 projects, covering solar panel installation, electric vehicle charging, air source heat pumps and improved insulation. Given the demand for this initiative, it is suggested that a further (albeit smaller) round takes place in 2025.

West Kent Business Support Programme – has run for 2.5 years and supported well over 1,000 businesses across West Kent. The support has included 100 businesses receiving 1-2-1 business mentoring, 60 businesses receiving a small business grant, and over 900 attending workshops, seminars and the West Kent Expo events. Given the momentum created by this programme, it is proposed to extend it for a year using UKSPF.

People and Skills Fund – will help to run a second round of this grant scheme, which aims to support disadvantaged individuals to work towards employment through training, volunteering and the development of soft skills. In the first round, the Council is supporting four local organisations – Oaks Specialist College, Runway Training, Communigrow and Compaid.

6 Other Options

- 6.1 As the level of funding allocated to the borough for 2025/26 is considerably lower than in 2024/25, there are a number of projects that were in the UKSPF programme in 2024/25 that are proposed to not be continued into the next financial year. These include:

Safer Sustainable Car Parks - had a considerable amount of capital in 2024/25 to deliver lighting improvements across 19 car parks in the borough. However, given the amount of capital on offer is extremely limited for 2025/26 it is proposed that any further investment in this area only be included as a back-up option in the unlikely event of capital underspend rather than included within the initial programme set out in Table 1.

Shopfront Improvement Grant Scheme – whilst it has delivered a wide range of excellent improvements and there is still interest in the scheme, this scheme has been running since 2019 with four rounds taking place in that period of time, with demand having dropped in recent rounds. In addition, it is a capital scheme, and there is a very limited capital funding on offer.

Digital Inclusion Project - a really good project that has been delivering benefits to digitally excluded residents through the provision of hardware and training. However, it has been challenging to get to the target of 225 people (at 190 in January 2024 as per most recent monthly report). Also, Kent County Council has been in the process of restructuring the Digital Kent team, so there is a reduced capacity when it comes to delivery post-March 2025.

Carbon Literacy Training - whilst ultimately the project is performing quite well and has helped to raise awareness, take up has been quite slow and a lot of time and effort has been required to get a small scheme off the ground.

Life Skills Project – in 2024/25 this project helped to fund a range of courses (both formal and informal) out in the community, including hair and beauty, emergency first aid, digital skills and food safety. Such initiatives could continue to be delivered albeit through the 'People and Skills Fund' included within the proposal.

Volunteering and Enrichment – in 2024/25 this project helped to fund two initiatives both aiming at encouraging greater volunteering amongst disadvantaged residents. As above, this could continue to be delivered efficiently through the 'People and Skills Fund' included within the proposal.

7 Rural England Prosperity Fund

- 7.1 During 2023-2025, the Rural England Prosperity Fund has been used to establish the West Kent Rural Grant Scheme in partnership with Sevenoaks District Council and Tunbridge Wells Borough Council. At the time of writing this report, 26 capital projects have now completed out of the 37 that have been awarded funding by the grants panel, equating to 75% of the budget having been spent to date. It is expected that the programme will be over 95% spent by the end of the financial year.
- 7.2 These projects have been delivered by a range of rural community groups, Parish Councils and rural businesses, and include improvements to Village Halls and green spaces, purchase of equipment and vehicles to support business, upgrades to tourism accommodation and activities, and new green energy infrastructure.
- 7.3 Whilst there has been considerable interest in this scheme, and it has helped to support our rural communities and businesses, as things stand the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has not made any announcement on whether there will be another round of the scheme during 2025/26. However, it is proposed that if there is Rural England Prosperity Funding available, that it be used for further rounds of the West Kent Rural Grant Scheme.

8 Next Steps

- 8.1 Should the proposed programme ultimately be approved by Cabinet in early March 2025, there will not be a requirement to submit an amended Tonbridge and Malling UKSPF Investment Plan to Government for approval, but instead to simply report the new programme to Government when the first return of the year is submitted, most likely in September/October 2025. As such, there should be minimal delays in being able to progress the programme at the start of the financial year.
- 8.2 As this programme will only run during 2025/26, it will be closely monitored to ensure that as much of the funding as possible is spent on the projects as set out in Table 1. However, Government does allow a degree of flexibility within the UKSPF programme, and as such in the event of any of the projects underspending, the aim would be to try and mop up that funding through other projects in the programme.

9 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

- 9.1 There are limited financial and value for money implications for the council as the report relates to existing external funding. However, the use of UKSPF funding to support corporate priority projects does have a positive impact on Council budgets.

10 Risk Assessment

10.1 The Risk Register for the programme will continue to be reviewed and updated. The key main risks highlighted in the assessment (and mitigated against where feasible) are:

- Loss of staffing to oversee and deliver the Programme.
- Non-compliance with UKSPF procurement and publicity requirements.
- Fraudulent grant applications and claims.
- Lack of demand for grant schemes.
- Non-delivery of projects.
- Impact of wider socio-economic issues (e.g. inflation, pandemics)

11 Legal Implications

11.1 There are limited financial and value for money implications for the council as the report relates to existing external funding. However, the use of UKSPF funding to support corporate priority projects does have a positive impact on Council budgets.

12 Consultation and Communications

12.1 As the programme progresses into its final year, there will continue to be a number of opportunities to communicate the benefits of the programme and to promote and encourage applications to our grant schemes to our communities, through our website and social media activity.

13 Implementation

13.1 The Tonbridge and Malling UKSPF Programme 2025/26 will be managed by the Economic Regeneration Team, with individual projects being delivered by officers from across the Council. A monthly Project Leads Meeting will take place to ensure that progress is closely monitored, key messaging shared and any issues addressed at an early stage.

14 Cross Cutting Issues

14.1 Climate Change and Biodiversity

14.1.1 Some impact on reducing emissions in support of carbon neutral by 2030 or enhancing the natural environment.

14.1.2 Climate change advice has been sought in the preparation of the options and recommendations in this report.

14.2 In line with the Council's Climate Change Strategy, there are a number of initiatives funded within this programme that will positively impact on reducing carbon emissions. These include the Green Business Grant Scheme and Carbon Descent Plans at our Leisure Centres.

14.3 Equalities and Diversity

14.4 The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

Background Papers	None
Annexes	None