



UK Government

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— UP —**

Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF)

Cheshire West and Chester Addendum

Executive Summary

April 2023

Cheshire West and Chester Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) Addendum

What is the Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF)?

The REPF builds on and is complementary to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)¹. It is an additional “top-up” capital fund made available to eligible local authorities in England and succeeds the European Union funding which had been available through LEADER and the Growth Programme, part of the Rural Development Programme for England.

The REPF should be used to address specific challenges faced by rural areas such as: lower productivity rates, poorer connectivity and poorer access to key services. The Fund will sit alongside other existing Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) schemes.

REPF is available from April 2023 to March 2025.

To access this fund, eligible local authorities were asked to submit an Addendum which outlined how this Fund would be used to deliver against Supporting Local Business and Communities and Place Investment Priorities. This could include:

- Supporting 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
- Supporting new and improved community infrastructure, providing essential community services and assets for local people and businesses to benefit the local economy

For the Rural Fund purposes, rural areas are defined as:

- Towns, villages and hamlets with populations below 10,000 and the wider countryside
- Market or ‘hub towns’ with populations of up to 30,000 that serve their surrounding rural areas as centres of employment and or by providing services

More information on the REPF can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rural-england-prosperity-fund-prospectus/rural-england-prosperity-fund-prospectus>

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-prospectus/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-prospectus>

Cheshire West and Chester REPF

Cheshire West and Chester Council (CW&C) has been awarded an REPF allocation of £992,101 to be spent over two-years.

The Council worked with stakeholders to identify key challenges and opportunities for the borough, using data/evidence and feedback from roundtables and conversations held with partners between September and November 2022. This intelligence has informed the Addendum for Cheshire West and Chester.

The Addendum was submitted to the Department for Levelling Up, Communities and Housing (DLUCH) on 30 November 2022 and was approved on 6 April 2023.

A summary of the specific rural challenges, market failures and opportunities for rural businesses and communities and Cheshire West can be found below.

Rural Challenges/ Market Failures

As our main UKSPF Investment Plan² outlined, although most of our more deprived wards are in urban communities, many rural areas experience challenges as a result of limited connectivity, both in terms of digital and transport infrastructure. The key rural challenges and market failures identified for Cheshire West are outlined in the table below:

Digital Connectivity	<p>Residents struggle to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• access services (which may have now become digital by default)• connect to friends and family through social media platforms• download/streaming services. <p>Businesses struggle to access effective, high speed broadband solutions preventing them from benefitting from business platforms.</p> <p>Improvements in local digital connectivity will also encourage future inward investment to the borough.</p>
Transport	<p>Poor transport links limit access to both training and employment opportunities, with many rural employers struggling to recruit staff and colleges and other FE training providers only able to support transport costs for those learners up to 19 years old.</p>

² <https://www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/asset-library/cwc-ukspf-investment-plan-executive-summary.pdf>

Access to Services	Lack of access may lead to isolation and loneliness, in particular those older residents, who may have weaker digital skills and may not feel able to benefit from digital platforms. There is also an expectation that residents will need to travel to urban areas to access services, for example Jobcentres.
Limited Economic Growth	Rural areas are reliant on low value sectors for employment, many of whom have been impacted by the pandemic, Brexit and the cost-of-living increases. These sectors include the visitor economy and food production. There is a need to diversify the types of business/employment opportunities available in rural areas.

Opportunities for Rural Businesses

Digital

Improvements in digital connectivity could help businesses manage operations and access advice services more effectively. Improved phone coverage would also improve employee health and safety as many agricultural employees work alone in remote locations.

Through working with the Connecting Cheshire Partnership³, CW&C will soon be able to access additional funding to support local infrastructure improvements, however this funding may not be available until 2025 and therefore we will need to explore alternative digital models in the meantime, building on pilots elsewhere in the country.

Transport

We need to explore and expand on projects developed to provide alternative transport arrangements such as those improving public or active transport links which will help rural businesses recruit and retain staff. Our over-reliance on use of private transport not only restricts employment opportunities for many residents, but also contributes to high levels of carbon emissions generated by the borough.

We appreciate that many transport projects can be very expensive and therefore not a realistic use of the REPF, however there could be opportunities to use this funding to enhance or expand an existing scheme.

Rural Economic Growth

We need to explore the potential of rural areas to diversify, grow and attract inward investment. For example, there could be opportunities to promote good farming practice and the benefits of regenerative agriculture along with energy production through natural capital, both supporting our net zero ambition.

³ <https://digital-cheshire.co.uk/>

We need to explore the potential to grow the number of rural businesses, such as developing co-working spaces across a range of local assets.

Focus for investment

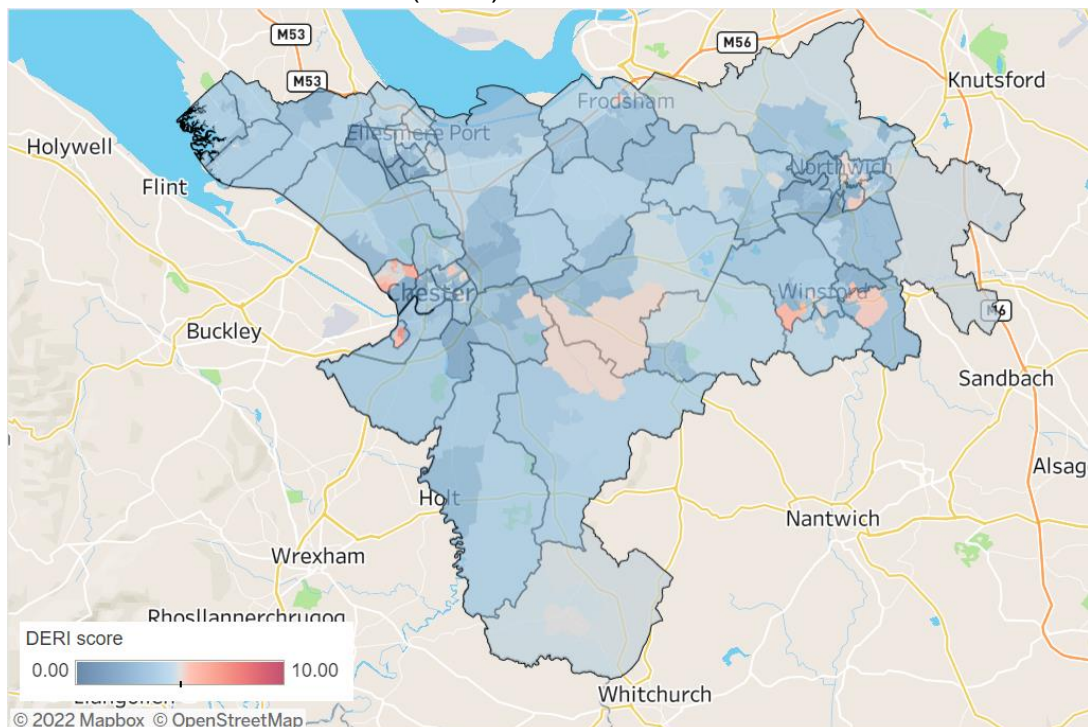
- Digital - Support the development of alternative digital connectivity models for parts of the borough, supporting both local businesses and communities, building on pilots delivered in other areas of the UK.
- Transport – Explore existing schemes such as the rural mobility project to see whether they could support businesses recruitment needs and resident’s employment needs
- Rural Economic Growth – explore extending the LEADER programme or similar to support diversification of rural industries and the development of rural workspaces.

Opportunities for Rural Communities

Digital

The Digital Exclusion Risk Index suggests around 8% (28,000) of Cheshire West and Chester residents are living in neighbourhoods defined as being at high risk of digital exclusion. Many of these areas are urban locations, however neighbourhoods in Frodsham and in the rural area between Tarvin, Tarporley and Tattenhall are also at risk of digital exclusion (See map 1 below).

Map 1: Map of the Digital Exclusion Risk Index for neighbourhoods (LSOAs) in Cheshire West and Chester (2021)



Transport

The Council is committed to improving transport links to employment and training opportunities, especially those faced by disabled and older people.

Therefore, we would like to explore how this fund could improve local community-led transport plans, improving access to both services, cultural and arts activities and employment opportunities.

Access to Services

Cheshire West residents do not feel that the local area has improved over recent years and that there is a need to invest in community, voluntary and faith organisations to support the health and wellbeing of local people. This includes those organisations delivering hyper-local services to support our vulnerable communities located in rural and isolated areas of the borough.

In 2019-20, 14.65% (9,003) of children were living in a low-income family (relative low income, before housing costs) in Cheshire West and Chester (19.1% in UK). In the rural areas of Marbury, Malpas, Gowy Rural and Frodsham at least 1 in 10 children were living in low-income households (relative low income, before housing costs). In Neston this is closer to 1 in 5 children living in poverty.

Locally health inequalities have persisted with significantly lower life expectancy in our more deprived areas. Although slightly higher than the England average for both men and women in West Cheshire, there are rural wards where this is not the case. For example, Gowy Rural, Neston, Saughall & Mollington and Shakerley.

At ward level the percentage of people who report having a limiting long-term illness, is concentrated in some of the most deprived areas. 20 of the 45 West Cheshire wards have rates above the borough average, including Neston, Weaver & Cuddington, Saughall & Mollington and Shakerley.

In 2020, 3.7% of young people in the borough were not in education, employment, or training (NEET). This is an increase of 1% since 2019. This percentage varies by ward areas with higher numbers than the borough in the rural wards of Malpas, Gowy Rural, Weaver & Cuddington, Marbury and Shakerley. Frodsham has higher rates than both national and regional levels at 6%.

Therefore, we would like to explore how this fund could help local services reach out to our rural residents, utilising and enhancing existing rural venues and infrastructure.

Focus for investment

- Digital - Support to develop alternative digital connectivity models for parts of the borough, supporting both local businesses and communities, building on pilots delivered in other areas of the UK.

- Transport – Explore existing schemes such as the rural mobility project to see whether they could support businesses recruitment needs and resident’s employment needs
- Access to services – Explore how this fund could improve community venues to provide services to residents which need it most, informed by robust local evidence. This will improve access to health and wellbeing support, libraries services, and support the arts and cultural offer in rural communities.

Interventions – Rural business (2023-2024 and 2024-2025)

The intervention CW&C has chosen to use to support local businesses in rural areas is:

- Funding (capital grants) for small scale investment in micro and small enterprises in rural areas.

The proposed activity will complement the wider supporting local business programme outlined in our core UKSPF Investment Plan and will encourage productivity in the borough through capital grants to help businesses to grow and diversify and/or re-configure workspaces to encourage start ups and scales up.

We are proposing building on the previous LEADER model, which encouraged a joint-funding approach. We are keen to see new business activity in areas which experience disadvantage (see the communities’ section) or who have not been eligible for previous funding streams.

This could include:

- Decarbonisation of rural businesses
- Development of digital solutions to support business growth
- Support for transport schemes to help employers recruit and retain staff.

We would hope that this activity would support the following UKSPF outcomes:

Jobs created and safeguarded
 New businesses created
 Businesses adopting new to the firm technologies or processes
 Businesses improving productivity
 Businesses experiencing growth

Interventions – Rural communities (2023-2024 and 2024-2025)

The interventions CW&C has chosen to use to support local communities in rural areas are:

- E15: Funding (capital grants) for investment and support for digital infrastructure for local community facilities.
- E11: Funding (capital grants) for investment in capacity building and infrastructure support for local civil society and community groups.

- E7: Funding (capital grants) for active travel enhancements in the local area.

The proposed activity will complement the wider communities and place programme outlined in our core UKSPF Investment Plan, helping voluntary and community organisations ensure that the centres and infrastructure they need to provide services and support to vulnerable residents are fit for purpose. This could include improved sustainable energy solutions, storage facilities to support multi-usage of a centre and general capital improvements.

As mentioned throughout this Addendum we will also be looking to use this capital funding to explore digital solutions that will enable communities to thrive and engage in modern life, either through accessing on-line services or applying for jobs/shopping etc.

We will also be looking to explore active transport solutions for rural communities, such as those which may improve links to railway or bus services, thus supporting access to employment and training opportunities, especially those residents who do not have access to private transport.

We would hope that this activity would support the following UKSPF outcomes:

Increased number users of facilities or amenities
Improved perception of facility or infrastructure project
Improved perception of facilities or amenities
Improved perceived or experienced accessibility
Increased use of cycleways or paths

Delivery

We are proposing that we would spend 37% of the indicative budget in year 1 (2023-2024) and 63% in year 2 (2024-2025). The table below provides more detail on the proposed breakdown of spend.

Year 1	Supporting Local Business	Indicative Spend	Communities and Place	Indicative Spend
£370,101	Funding (capital grants) for small scale investment in micro and small enterprises in rural areas.	£180,101	E15: Funding (capital grants) for investment and support for digital infrastructure for local community facilities.	£60,000
			E11: Funding (capital grants) for investment in capacity building and infrastructure support for local civil society and community groups - Complementing the indicative spend of the £1,874,106 in the Core UKSPF Plan	£80,000
			E7: Funding (capital grants) for active travel enhancements in the local area.	£50,000
Total		£180,101		£190,000

Year 2	Supporting Local Business	Indicative Spend	Communities and Place	Indicative Spend
£622,000	Funding (capital grants) for small scale investment in micro and small enterprises in rural areas.	£302,000	E15: Funding (capital grants) for investment and support for digital infrastructure for local community facilities.	£100,000
			E11: Funding (capital grants) for investment in capacity building and infrastructure support for local civil society and community groups - Complementing the indicative spend of the £1,874,106 in the Core UKSPF Plan	£170,000
			E7: Funding (capital grants) for active travel enhancements in the local area.	£50,000
Total		£302,000		£320,000