

UKSPF Year 2 Progress Report

Summary

Year 2; 2023/24 of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) saw Maidstone Borough Council awarded £298,478 to spend towards the Community and Place Investment Priority as set out in the UKSPF Project Plan. This figure included a small underspend of £7,397 from Year 1 activities.

During this year MBC spent £298,357 towards interventions such as: Improvements to the Town Centre, Creation and improvement to local green spaces, supporting local arts and heritage activities, campaigns to encourage visits to the town centre and volunteering and social action projects.

In the final year of funding; 2024/25, MBC will have £741,661 provided by central government to continue the progress of projects to date, as well as a large-scale capital project to provide a safe and attractive town centre, through enhancements to greening and a lighting infrastructure.

Further to this, the government launched the Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) prospectus as an addition to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. We were allocated £539,728 to spend between 2023 and 2025 on capital interventions in our rural communities as part of the REPF. The REPF in Maidstone aims to support rural communities to modernise and improve their assets to provide multiuse spaces that improve health, wellbeing, reduce rural loneliness, while having a positive impact on the local environment, contribute towards net zero, support the local rural economy, and promote community cohesion. Grants of up to £50,000 were made available to eligible organisations. In 2023/24 four bids from local community groups were successful, with £134,932 awarded to projects such as installing Solar Panels and Electric Vehicle Charge Points.

Updates on Projects and activities in Year 2

Year 2 of UKSPF activities has seen multiple projects continue across Maidstone town centre. Many different events have been taking place across the town, which with the support of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund has increased visitors and footfall into Maidstone. These events include the Maidstone Arts Carnival, River Carnival and Wild about Maidstone. In October 2023, we hosted Maidstone's first ever Literary Festival. The event championed local authors, with a showcase event at Lockmeadow Entertainment Centre, readings and workshops across Maidstone primary schools, Kent Library and History Centre, The Archbishop's Palace and Maidstone Museum. Funding from UKSPF has also supported our town centre special of Borough Insight Magazine which was delivered to over 83,000 residential addresses across the borough, keeping residents up to date with events and opportunities for all in our Town Centre.

Our Creative Community Grants have distributed thousands of pounds to local community groups. In year 2, this was 22 community groups receiving funding of up to £2,000 per project. Each project prioritising pride in our borough and its communities, increasing participation/engagement in arts and cultural activities; working with diverse audiences and supporting new and existing creative talent in the borough.

The sculptures for the Iggy Sculpture Trail were installed on 27th & 28th March by the artists Gary and Thomas Thrussell, under the watchful gaze of David Britchfield, Archaeologist. No significant archaeological finds were made during the excavations and the installations went ahead without incident. A launch event was held on Wednesday 3rd April 2024 featuring a giant T-Rex and two baby dinosaurs (puppets). The Mayor officially launched the new 'Magical Beasts' sculpture trail before the dinosaurs went walkabout in Brenchley Gardens and Fremlin Walk. More than 400 people attended the launch in the morning. The action moved to Lockmeadow Entertainment Centre in the

afternoon where two interactive 'How to train your Dinosaur' shows were delivered to around 100 people per show. The digital app that supports the new physical sculpture trail was also promoted during the launch event with lots of people taking leaflets and scanning the QR code on the promotional banner. As of 7th April, 715 people have downloaded the app; 1,388 individual sights have been visited (recorded by GPS so represents actual footfall); and 376 people have viewed the Magical Beasts trail.

In partnership with Involve Kent, our Green Spaces volunteering projects commenced this year. 100% of volunteers said they enjoyed taking part in volunteering and that it increased their sense of feeling connected in the community. A total of 87 supported volunteering sessions took place, which included regularly attended events at Maidstone Community Support Centre Community Garden, Brenchley Gardens, Trinity House, The Amphitheatre and Rose Garden, and Maidstone Museum, these will continue into 2024/25.

The 'REPF' grants for the borough of Maidstone aim to support rural communities to help modernise and improve assets to provide multiuse spaces and improve health, wellbeing, reduce rural loneliness. Following the full allocation towards four successful bids for rural funding in 2023/24 a further 21 submissions were received by local community groups and parishes for funding in 2024/25. The panel conducted a review of submissions in February and awarded the remaining funding 12 bids from across the borough. These projects will commence in April 2024 with progress closely monitored by officers to ensure all are completed by March 2025.

In Year 3 we will continue our series of events supporting visitors to Maidstone Town Centre. This includes the return of our Literacy Festival in October 2024 following the success in Year 2. Our final year of the Green Volunteering Project will see opportunities on a weekly basis to get involved in greening up, planting and revitalising planting areas across the Town Centre. These opportunities will increase over the summer months.

'Shaun the Sheep in the Heart of Kent' is an exciting free art trail that will see up to 50 large individually decorated Shaun the Sheep sculptures placed around the parks, town centre and river walks in Maidstone and the surrounding areas. This will launch on June 29th and is delivered by our partner Heart of Kent Hospice.

Our outdoor fitness and gym equipment has begun installation at Lockmeadow Entertainment Centre. The project is expected to be open to the public from May 2024.