

# **UK Community Renewal Fund April 2021**

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## **Questions and Answers**

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# Introduction

Essex County Council shared an open invitation to potential bidders for the UK Community Renewal Fund to an online Question and answer (Q&A) session on Monday 19 April 2021.

The Council's Economic Growth Team hosted the session which consisted of an overview of the project and the process for submitting project bids. The session then allowed for potential bidders to ask any questions in relation to the project.

This document provides the questions and answers received before and during the Q&A session.

# Questions and Answers

## Questions received before online Q&A session

1. Are there any age restrictions on the residents you can support? E.g. do people engaged to participate on a project have to be 19+ or can a project be aimed at secondary school / college students?

While there is no mention of this in the prospectus, we expect that certain age groups will be more relevant within the differing investment priorities – for example some of the skills proposals to be aimed at college students or school leavers.

2. Can programmes to create employment outcomes be focussed on a specific sector (so long as it's a strategic priority)?

We would expect projects to focus on the sectors that are relevant in their local place such as life sciences and MedTech within Harlow, we would also hope that there would be focus on those sectors which have seen recent unemployment or other effects from the pandemic.

3. Could you please let us know what the eligibility criteria are for individual and consortium bids? / Are you open to consortium bids?

These are acceptable but if there is more than one organisation then a lead applicant must be designated with the other parties acting as delivery partners – this then means that the lead applicant is responsible and liable for ensuring the project is operating as planned.

4. Are you inviting bids for only Harlow and Tendring or for other places? / Are projects restricted to delivery in Harlow and Tendring? / Essex CC have selected Harlow and Tendring as priority areas, is it true that in practice bids can cover the whole Essex area, with the expectation that 51% of delivery might be in those two priority places?

The Government published a list of 100 priority places based upon an index of economic resilience, for ECC this included Harlow and Tendring. While bids can be submitted from other areas it is worth noting that the ranking of projects after assessment considers the predominant focus of the project. So, projects with a majority spend (51% +) in priority places will be ranked higher than those not in priority places.

5. Some lead authorities have suggested a minimum value of project, are Essex looking at this? / Are you looking for bids in excess of £500k or between £250k - £500k / Is there a particular size of programme (in financial value) that you're more likely to fund?

While there is no official guidance on 'minimum spend' it's worth thinking about the impact and scale that you want your proposals to have and the effect this will have on the economic recovery of the communities. We encourage organisations around the county to speak to each other and engage on this and see if there is scope for joint bids. Part of the government assessment criteria is relating to value for money so we would encourage organisations to join to get that larger impact from the funding available. It's also worth noting that the monitoring guidance states that successful projects will need to develop an evaluation plan with between 1-2% of their award to be dedicated to that evaluation with a minimum threshold of £10,000

6. Can the capital funds available under this initiative be invested into equity (convertible loans as one example) in those businesses eligible for support?

Guidance states that this cannot be used to establish loan or investment funds.

7. Are you looking for match funding, does it need to be financial?

While match funding isn't compulsory especially for employment support projects, it is encouraged within the government prospectus to align enhancement with other provision and provide efficient delivery where it can.

8. How many projects and organisations would the council like to put forward and do you have in mind a cap amount that one organisation can apply for? / Have you decided on the overall scale of your bid and the relative distribution between elements that will be included (even though the main funding doesn't ring fence in this way)? / Related to the above, do you have a view of the numbers of beneficiaries and scale you want to reach in each of the areas?

ECC are hoping to balance proposals across the 4 priorities evenly in order that focus is on all areas of the economy and recovery. We also hope to see a range of projects and amounts requested so that we can make up to as close to £3m as possible and get as much funding for the county as we can. Although it's a quick turnaround in terms of process, its early doors for bid proposals and we haven't seen those ideas yet but what we do hope is to be able to submit a portfolio of ideas that cover the balance of interventions, both light touch approaches and the more complex projects.

9. Out of the 5 key areas are you providing guidance for specific area need? / What key Essex strategies should projects focus on? / What do the council see as the key local skills and labour market needs in Harlow and Tendring?

We have included within our invitation to bid document which you will receive this week a section on local priorities which have been drawn from the statements on the slide, but also from the Prosperity and Productivity plan for Essex which was published by Success Essex. This plan draws on 4 missions – a dynamic economy, a resilient economy, an inclusive economy, and a connected economy. ECC will assess bids against their alignment with these local strategies as well as your own knowledge and experience of what local needs your communities are facing. As organisations based within these places, you are at the best places to articulate the understanding of what your communities need, and we would expect to see this type of evidence within the submission.

10. Could you tell me about the arrangements you are planning to have with Boroughs and Districts for this programme?

ECC have been working closely with Harlow and Tendring district councils in the run up to the bid submission period to engage in conversations around their local priorities and what proposals can be formulated to benefit these, as well as asking them to engage with organisations and community groups in their districts who may be interested in submitting a bid.

11. How are you looking to measure the impact and outcome of the Community Renewal Fund programme? / How do you intend to evaluate the various delivery elements? In particular, funding for skills/workforce-based interventions frequently comes with expectation of onwards tracking of beneficiaries. How do you intend this to integrate with subsequent funded activity and if you could give a general flavour of the kind of evaluation and monitoring framework you have in mind?

The prospectus has laid out some brief guidance around the monitoring that ECC will be following, but as a minimum we would expect any plans to contain a proposal of milestones and targets which will lead to the outcomes. We are checking the website for any updates or further guidance on this evaluation framework so that we can formulate a solid proposed plan which we will set out once successful bids are announced, and funding agreements drawn up. It is worth noting the need for an evaluation plan and the minimum threshold amount. As this fund is a pilot of the larger shared prosperity fund, it is expected that these pilot approaches and the information and data gained from the will give both the project owner and ECC some information to prepare for this fund when it is released. Any milestones and targets will need to be realistic for the short timescale of the projects and how these might inform future projects and working practices.

12. What is number of residents you are aiming to reach over the duration of the programme?

Whilst there is no magic number, we would draw your attention to the value for money criteria and for proposals to think about the scale of the project and how this can reach as many people as possible with the funds requested.

13. Will there be claw backs if predicted outcomes are not achieved?

the prospectus states that underspend will be recovered which we would expect in extreme circumstances - where the project has failed to adhere to the proposal at all.

14. Will Social Justice outcomes be acceptable, that are recognised by DWP to measure the distance travelled by participants?

Outcomes such as these would be more than acceptable. The assessment criteria mention contribution to local needs and the four investment priorities, so these tick these boxes as we are looking to support local communities recover and look towards the future.

## Questions received during online Q&A session

1. Is 90% revenue funding a 90/10 split per project or 90% of all project's revenue and 10% of projects capital?

UK Government are looking for predominately or wholly revenue funding. The capital portion is to give a little bit of flexibility, but the proposals are predominately revenue based.

2. Does evaluation need to be completed by March 2022?

We are awaiting further clarification from MHCLG on how the evaluation side will operate. No dates yet in the prospectus of when evaluation will run from or too just that it needs to be done, so we will be posting an update on this on our website when we know more. In all the documents the government has published so far, they are looking at piloting real innovative ways of working and the impact this type of funding will have in a lead up to the Shared Prosperity Fund which will follow next year. There is a real strong emphasis on the evaluation side because of this.

3. A minimum of £10k spent on evaluation (at ½% of overall project spend), would indicate a minimum project value of £500k? I can see they wanted to encourage larger projects, but it sounds from this that anything smaller wouldn't be considered.

The documentation so far would indicate that they are looking for larger bids around the £500k mark. However, we need to clarify this further with MCFLG and expect that there is further guidance coming out. We will publish clarification on this and the evaluation matter as soon as we can.

4. Can a copy of the Success Essex "Prosperity and Productivity Plan" be sent out please?

There will be a link to this in the 'Invitation to Bid' document which will be published later this week.

5. The majority of priorities seem to be aimed at the economy, therefore can you please clarify if the 'support communities to bounce back from covid-19' has to also have economic links or can it be about community development and wellbeing/resilience?

That priority isn't solely focused on the economy. There may be a link to the economy in that specific priority, but the aim is to create and promote strong communities where people want to visit, work and live. The government have helpfully given a set of examples of projects that might come through such as net zero, local energy projects, promoting culture led regeneration, improving green spaces, enhancing rural connectivity – that's not an exclusive list but gives an impression that it's not just about enhancing the economy but when you are making that case its helpful to align it to the economic arguments to build up a stronger case that these things are connected. For example, a green community development that sits in a town centre that has some relationship to footfall, that's not primarily about the economy but there is some join up there.

6. Given the requirement to spend the money by March 2022, how does the funding for the evaluation fit into this timescale? If the evaluation is to assess the success of a pilot that would need to take place once the project has been completed which would be after March 2022. I appreciate the evaluation can run alongside the actual project as well as a final report.

The expectation is that if a proposal is successful then you are in a relationship with ECC and providing monitoring and evaluation data as you go. One of the things that gets contracted will be key points when you need to provide information and we will have to understand where milestones are and what outcomes are and who the beneficiaries are. In terms of the longer-term bit this is again something we need to clarify. The government prospectus states there is a mid-point review in November/December.

7. Will there be a mandatory referral process for the employability programmes, or will it be voluntary attendance as it can be a challenge to engage with local residents especially as there is such a small window for the programmes to run.

We don't think there will a mandatory referral process for a type of kickstart programme or apprentice scheme but one the of the things you might want to look at is the relationship between projects proposed and those types of schemes and the join up between those things. The timescales are challenging, and it would be helpful to use existing type relationships. If there are ECC led programmes like kickstart we would look to join these things up as part of our role.

8. Can this funding be used to supplement or as a contribution to current larger projects that are ongoing?

Yes, this is fine, but it has to be a new element as the funding cannot be used for retrospective payments. That part of the project would have to be starting from say August, but the prospectus does encourage projects that run alongside other funding if the part using the CRF is a new strand.

9. Please could you say more about the level of innovation required. Will tried and tested models from elsewhere, adapted to local needs represent an adequate level of innovation?

Models that are tested elsewhere that are adopting to local need are acceptable, it's a difficult one to try and judge how you quantify 'is that innovative enough'. Within the strategic fit assessment criteria there is wording around innovation. If you are taking something that has been delivered elsewhere and localising it and giving it a stronger sense of place then you are doing that first bit of criteria, you are introducing a new delivery approach and you've got evaluation wrapped around that placed in the local area then that's something that different then you are covering it.

10. Is 'Place' synonymous with Local Authority area? i.e. max of £3m funding available per LA?

Place refers to the 'district' or 'Local Authority', we can submit bids of £3m PER PLACE.

11. Is there a limit on the number of partners that could be involved in the proposed project?

There is no limit but bear in mind that one person in the consortium will be lead organisation and be liable for all the other partners so you would need to manage your expectation of managing these.

12. Assuming the bid would need to be approximately £500k would the deliverable outputs need to be achieved before March 2022 or just commence before then?

The guidance states that all the money must be spent, and activities wrapped up by March. That's why it's important for bidders to think about milestones are put in place to judge outcomes, realistically it's a six month period so all the outcomes you might wish, for example for vulnerable or complex cohorts might be achievable in a six month period so you need to be able to plot progress towards those outcomes.

13. Will bids of a similar nature or geographical area be grouped together to achieve the larger £500k scheme preference?

At ECC we won't be grouping bids together but makes sense locally to collaborate for the increased scale and impact. Therefore, we have sent out the attendee list to those who have attended the Q&A to encourage those sorts of conversations.

14. Would bids for delivery of work skills and sector specific vocational qualifications be welcome independently or as part of a wider project?

In principle this sounds fine. Perhaps look at the guidance document around the skills priority, but yes, fundamentally those things could work as a single stream of projects.

15. We're obviously looking at future UK SPF to continue to support and develop local programmes currently funded via ESF/ERDF. Current extensions to those projects will see some overlap. How will this dovetail? Is there an opportunity to match?

So much unknown at the moment around crossovers with funds so it's not fair for us to comment at present, we will take this one away to think about.

16. The UK CRF Assessment guidance states that 'match funding is not a requirement for any project and will not be an assessment consideration for projects solely focused on employment interventions. However, the guidance also states that if projects can bring match funding or other leverage to generate impact, this will be taken into account in the value for money assessment. Can you give any further

clarification on how you will be taking availability of match funding into account and how much weight will be given to match funding?

Match funding isn't a requirement, and we haven't got into the finer details of assessment criteria so we will have to come back to you around weighting for this. We would however I imagine take into account how reliant the project is on the match funding.

17. Can we partner up with a public body, such as a District Council? Our charity would be leading on the project.

Yes, this is fine, as we've mentioned people are fine to partner up. We know that local councils have already been putting their feelers out, so perhaps speak to people there or we can facilitate discussions.

18. Can projects be delivered across 'places', with the amount of money allocated to each area specified so that it can be counted against the £3m cap?

Yes, this is fine but take into consideration the assessment criteria around predominant places and how these projects will be ranked. But it is £3m per place.

19. You said "per place" are you talking about the district/borough as a place or Essex as a whole? Also are District or Borough Councils able to be partners?

Place is the district, so yes per place is for example Harlow or Tendring. As mentioned previously its fine to have local councils as partners.

20. How will ECC be tracking the progress/success of the projects that are successful in gaining the funding?

This was covered earlier on but just to reiterate; we will provide further clarification once this is published.

21. Will Social Justice outcomes be acceptable, that are recognised by DWP to measure the distance travelled by participants?

Outcomes such as these would be more than acceptable. The assessment criteria mention contribution to local needs and the four investment priorities, so these tick these boxes as we are looking to support local communities recover and look towards the future.

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