

**WHAT IS THE POTENTIAL FOR BIODIVERSITY VENUES (e.g. ZOOS, BOTANIC SITES, WILDLIFE PARKS, AQUARIA) TO CONTINUE TO BENEFIT FROM REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT GRANT FUNDING UNDER THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT/ ECONOMIC CLIMATE?**

**John Regan Associates 18/10/2022**

In the last few days I have been collating information and views from both particular local contacts across the UK responsible for economic development in specific individual regions; as well as from Whitehall officials close to policy development in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and other central government sources.

Clearly this must seem a baffling and uncertain time for conservation focussed visitor attractions which might at some stage aspire to draw down transformative grant funding for major capital funding, as has been previously achieved by certain organisations. The Levelling Up Fund and Shared Prosperity policy banners were of course associated with the Johnson administration, largely now disowned by the Truss premiership, whose own policy position is in turn in the process of dissolution. Additionally successive shocks to the UK economy would seem to have reduced the ability of the public purse (*whoever* might be in charge and following *whatever* political philosophy) to support your projects.

My canvassing multiple perspectives however resulted in the a strong degree of consensus as follows. Some of you may find this useful; and indeed encouraging:

- Funding for the right kind of ‘socio-economic uplift proposals’ will continue. One or other resource of this sort has pretty much always been available for the last forty years. Please note this is not the same as saying there having been an open call for projects at every single point over the same period; but rather that a relevant budget line will always open up;
- Government initiatives and their ‘catchy titles’ (LUF, UKSP, City and County Deals, Northern Powerhouse, Midlands Engine, Growing Places, etc) will come and go; your regional or local grant making authority ( the ‘middleman for government funding) has changed and will continue to change as well. In my own time alone in this field, we have had
  - Urban Development Corporations,
  - TECs,
  - RDAs, and
  - LEPs.

At time of writing most funding goes through local government.

- The central focus of each successive scheme may also change over time with varying stress on training, social benefits, job creation, research, innovation place making, etc. To the benefit of our own sector climate change and biodiversity have certainly increased in prominence. The important point is that the overall and central concept of raising the socio-economic outlook of a given place will remain a constant;
- In context of the much discussed public spending cuts, the amounts your organisation might target (let us say, anything from £1 million to £30 million), whilst certainly game changing for you, are actually tiny in the scheme of things. Furthermore even in the most straitened of

times, capital expenditure (dwarfed by revenue outgoings on the NHS, education, etc.) is normally protected;

- In those cases where a City or County deal has been agreed already, this is a binding legal commitment between your local authority and central government which cannot be broken, so that funding stream and its specific quantum is guaranteed into the future.

Some other important considerations:

- All of my correspondents (- and again these include *both* local government officials to seek to draw down capital funding for their area, *and* the central government officials whose duty it is to disburse such funding) felt strongly that interests wishing to benefit from future funding schemes should not wait until such schemes are announced per se; much less for actual funding calls to become open. However frustrating it certainly is, the lead time allowed by the funding programme (business plans to be drawn up, partnerships formulated, support of the requisite political figures to be canvassed, etc.) will be very short. Some degree of project preparation needs to happen *now*, not at some indeterminate future point.
- This of course, given finite time and mind space to develop a concept and that funding success cannot ever be absolutely guaranteed, is easier said than done! There are a number of ways to finesse matters though which can be shared at the right point. Certainly organisations seeking to benefit from external funding at some stage should engage now with their local authority at least to embed their full offer inside that locality's economic growth plan. Crucially you need to ensure they understand and agree the widest possible context in which your project will contribute to your socio-economic landscape, and avoid being lazily confined to the 'tourism box', or even solely within the (very important) biodiversity agenda.
- It is worth emphasizing that all of my correspondents in local government around the country, whose job it is to encourage the right kind of project to win this funding, are disappointed that benefitting parties fail to contact them at an early enough stage.
- There is also agreement and indeed eagerness for individual projects based in distinct parts of the UK, where there is some common theme or delivery, to collaborate on an ambitious funding bid.

Finally it is perhaps worth briefly (and carefully) touching on individual political perspectives? Some looking at successive recent governments' pronouncements as to their initiatives seeking to benefit *all* aspects of society and *all* parts of the United Kingdom may be sceptical as to how genuine this ambition is? This could be as to how effective the total programme will be or how sufficient the overall finance allowed.

In this particular context I suggest the leadership of your organisation sets aside any personal view on this; and opportunistically focusses on the benefit for your *own* institution and its *own* mission. As long as you are intent that your individual project will genuinely deliver the benefits for the environment and society which you have promised, then...

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Go for it!