

21 SEPTEMBER 2023

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

RESOURCES AND TRANSFORMATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of a meeting of the Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on Thursday, 21 September 2023

* Cllr Alan O'Sullivan (Chairman)
Cllr Barry Dunning (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors:

* Alan Alvey
* Jack Davies
* Jacqui England
* David Millar

Councillors:

* Barry Rickman
* Alex Wade
* Christine Ward

*Present

In attendance:

Councillors:

Jill Cleary

Councillors:

Jeremy Heron

Also In Attendance:

Mr N Young, CEO Citizens Advice New Forest and Jeremy Ogden (CANF Representative).

Officers Attending:

Rebecca Drummond, Gary Jarvis, Ryan Stevens, Amanda Wilson and Andy Rogers

Apologies

Apologies were received from Cllr Dunning.

17 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 June were confirmed as a correct record.

18 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

19 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There were no issues raised during the public participation period.

20 CITIZEN ADVICE NEW FOREST - UPDATE (PRESENTATION) - TO FOLLOW

The Panel received an update from Mr Neill Young, CEO of Citizens Advice New Forest (CANF), and Mr Jeremy Ogden, Chair of Trustees of CANF, on their activities over the last year. A copy of the slides used in the update are appended to these minutes.

CANF was a local organisation which provided free confidential advice and information, to help people overcome their problems. CANF had five offices in the New Forest in Hythe, Lymington, New Milton, Ringwood and Totton, all in premises shared with other organisations. CANF also had access to national citizens advice resources.

CANF was supported by 68 volunteers and 27 staff members and helped approximately 5000 people per year with a multiple range of complex problems, from financial problems to relationships and family issues.

CANF was funded by a number of local and national trusts, charities and organisations. CANF received 45% of its funding from this Council (currently £190K) on 3 year rolling funding agreements expiring on 31 March 2025, and was very grateful for this funding. A new funding agreement was being developed.

Examples were given of case work to support residents and other activities undertaken within the community, together with work on trends such as increasing debt, cost of living pressures and more people with mental health issues.

It was explained that not all CANF offices were able to be open 5 days per week, as this required at least 3 people to be present and this was not always possible.

In response to a question, it was explained that work on the CANF Cost of Living Steering Groups action plan was ongoing and some themes were emerging. It was hoped that NFDC could support the outcomes of the plan as well as the related actions and campaigns.

It was queried whether the figure of 68 volunteers was low or high in comparison to recent trends, and how the Council could help. In reply, it was commented that it was important to take on volunteers in a measured way as they needed to be properly trained.

Members also asked whether there were plans to expand the schools project into the Waterside, Pennington and the wider Forest. In answer, it was explained that the success of the project would be assessed, and expansion depended on additional funding. There was an overall aspiration to expand to all schools as a 2 year project.

It was reported that there were pockets of deprivation in the Forest in areas such as Totton, Waterside, Calshot and New Milton, and CANF were active in these communities.

District Councillors were welcome to contact the service to arrange a visit to learn more about CANF's work and the challenges it faced.

Members asked what they could do to assist CANF, and it was suggested that they gain an understanding of the challenges in their local community, and encourage

town and parish councils to support CANF financially. Contact was being made with local councils in the next few weeks.

On behalf of the Council, the Chairman praised CANF for the vital work it did for the local community, and thanked Mr Young and Mr Ogden for their attendance and their very interesting presentation.

21 UNIVERSAL CREDIT UPDATE

The Panel received an update on the migration to Universal Credit, including a brief summary of the managed migration process and subsequent impacts.

Universal Credit (UC) supported people of working age who were out of work or on a low income and replaced a number of legacy benefits (eg Housing Benefit), which had been combined into one monthly UC payment.

From 1 April 2024 existing Housing Benefit claimants would gradually transfer from the Council to the DWP, though exact dates were not currently known. The Council would work with its partners to raise awareness and consider any potential impacts on claimants.

Members queried what was being done to help people with repayment plans where there had been overpayments. It was explained that the majority of overpayments were due to people not advising the Council when there was a change in their circumstances, often going back for lengthy periods of time. The actual local authority error rate was very low. There were statutory amounts that could be deducted from ongoing housing benefit entitlements.

The Council also worked with clients where required, to agree new more affordable instalment plans and at the same time checked whether they were eligible for any other benefits or support. Payments were only written off where there was no realistic chance of recovering sums.

It was queried whether there were any targets for raising awareness of the changes. Officers reported that the Council aimed to work with the DWP to contact everyone moving from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit to ensure they got the income they were entitled to. Various communication channels were used including the Hometalk publication, leaflets, social media and drop - in centres.

It was hoped that statistical data would be made available by the DWP to give a picture on progress with the migration.

Migration would by default be online, but support was given via phone and in person in job centres, and planned for libraries and hubs.

In answer to a question on some claimants being 35% worse off, it was explained that transitional protection would not be available those who chose to migrate voluntarily. The only way that they could get transitional help was through the managed migration process.

Resources would continue to be reviewed and staff would be transferred where their skills applied to other services within the Council, and an overall review of resources would be undertaken when the migration process was complete.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted

22 PROCUREMENT UPDATE

The Panel considered proposed changes to the Procurement Strategy, which was being refreshed as the last strategy was for the period 2018-22.

Proposed Changes included:

- Improvement Goals for Value, Compliance, Environment and Fairness have been updated to reflect progress made and latest target dates
- Alignment with the 2021 climate changes and nature emergency statement from NFDC full Council
- Governance narrative in reflecting the introduction of Contract Relationship Officer (CRO) role to overview contract management by Strategic Directorship
- Proposed changes to waivers in contract standing orders.

The Strategy and presentation included details of the NFDC procurement thresholds, proposed changes to waivers, the procurement process, and the Procurement Team structure.

Members felt there was a good balance between strong governance and pragmatism with the thresholds shown.

It was queried why the non – profit making sector was not included in the Guiding Principles section to ensure that contractors took on board considerations relating to public service obligations. In reply, it was explained that the Council did not tend to do much outsourcing, but such obligations were typically covered in contracts rather than in the strategy. Officers undertook to consider including wording to reflect this concern where appropriate. It was further noted that the Council was in the process of reviewing its corporate plan and these issues would be considered when setting strategic objectives.

A query was raised concerning the Freedom Leisure contract and the ability to enforce aspects where it was perceived that certain community interests were not being represented, eg with local swimming clubs. It was acknowledged that specifications were the key and it was important that intended outcomes were made clear. In respect of Freedom Leisure, it was confirmed that the operator contract allowed Freedom Leisure to review the programme of use related to services provided by local clubs and teams which had historically used the centres.

It was suggested that under the Value For Money section, the specification be included in this section to facilitate fixing errors in the specification. Officers undertook to consider including a paragraph to reflect this comment where appropriate.

Members emphasised the importance of ensuring contract specifications were fit for purpose. Additionally, it was felt the environmental impacts of the manufacture of the items being procured should be considered in the contract life cycle, strategy and procedures.

Members queried the local / national procurement balance and the extent to which costs were offset by the environmental impact on how the items were manufactured. Officers explained this national / local split was dependent on the replies from tender exercises and related communications work.

It was also queried how contractors interacted with the Council with conflict resolution and relationship issues, and whether this was included in the contract. It was noted that additional contract relationship resource had recently been obtained and quarterly KPIs were recorded.

RESOLVED:

That the refresh of the Procurement Strategy be supported, subject to the consideration of amendments suggested by the Panel as set out above.

23 RETENTION AND DESTRUCTION POLICY

The Panel received an update and overview on a programme of work undertaken over the past year which had resulted in the creation and adoption of the Council's Corporate Retention and Destruction Schedule ('the Schedule'), following its approval by EMT on 11 July 2023.

The creation of the Schedule had been a large piece of work, involving collaboration with many officers across the Council. Its implementation was important for the Council's proper management of its records and in compliance with legislation.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

24 PORTFOLIO HOLDERS' UPDATES

The Panel received updates from the Leader, and the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate, on developments within their portfolios.

Cllr Cleary, Leader

The Leader had been focused on work with partners, including the Solent Freeport Board, to ensure that the District's priorities were given focus within the wider Freeport programme. The Council had always been clear that the Council supported the Solent Freeport and the planned growth not as an end in itself, but to deliver much needed infrastructure, jobs and housing. Officers were shaping a clear set of priorities for the New Forest that the Council would work with partners to see delivered. Some of these outcomes would take many years to see come to fruition, such as the A326 enhancements.

In addition to a joint leaders' letter to the Chancellor, the Leader had also written to MP Dr Julian Lewis, who had made the case onwards for an extension to the tax

site fiscal incentives for the Solent Freeport. Achieving this will make a big difference.

Work was ongoing with partners across the New Forest on regeneration and growth. The allocation of funding to the District from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, and the Rural Prosperity fund would make a big difference and Cllr Cleary was keen within the fund criteria, to see this funding available to address some of the challenges our towns and rural communities were facing.

On a wider footprint, it was noted the Government had announced that the statutory functions of the Local Enterprise Partnerships would pass to upper tier or unitary authorities. Further information was awaited from Hampshire County Council about how they proposed to work with Districts to take forward this agenda, and NFDC had expressed an interest in addressing rural economy issues with other Hampshire districts.

Whilst there were no plans at the moment going forward for devolution across Hampshire, the Leader had supported the District Council Network campaign and written to the Secretary of State, Michael Gove, to emphasise the role that District Councils needed to play in any future county combined authority model.

Within the organisation the Leader continued to meet regularly with staff, having undertaken 3 depot visits as well as the Service showcase, which was an amazing opportunity for all members to find out more about the range of services NFDC delivered. The Leader was pleased the Council was undertaking an LGA peer review into HR and organisational development, and hoped that this work would guide next steps in developing a 'People strategy' and plan that moved the Council forward with our employer of choice aspirations.

It was explained that the Elections team were currently undertaking the annual canvass to check the registration details the Council held in order to publish the revised Register of Electors on 1st December. The next phase of the Election Act that introduced Voter ID for the May 2023 elections, was imminent, with work underway by central government to allow electors to apply to vote by post online from 31st October 2023. The Elections Team was also starting to work on planning for the Police and Crime Commissioner election to be held in May 2024.

The Leader was asked about any emerging Freeport benefits, particularly for the western part of the Forest, including any investment. Cllr Cleary reported that she was due to attend 3 scheduled meetings on this topic over the next 2 weeks, as she was concerned to see some tangible benefits and related timescales. She still believed this was a major opportunity of benefit to the New Forest and was pressing for some information on anticipated outcomes which could be brought back and reported to the Council. The Council would also strive to work with the new Levelling Up Minister in this regard.

It was queried why the letter requesting the extension to the tax incentive had been sent, and it was explained that better incentives were sought.

A member expressed concerns regarding the recent decision by Freedom Leisure to give local swimming clubs notice to cease lessons at District Council owned swimming pools. The Leader was asked what assurance could be given that she was engaging with the relevant Portfolio holder and Freedom Leisure to address people's concerns. The Leader confirmed that she was about to discuss this matter and it was hoped there would be a resolution soon.

Cllr Heron, Finance and Corporate Portfolio Holder

Councillor Heron praised the work of Citizens Advice New Forest, emphasising how much its work was appreciated in the District, and indicating the Council's continuing support.

The Portfolio Holder also paid tribute to the service manager for Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services, and his team, for their hard work and dedication in ensuring the community were supported to the best of their and the Council's ability.

It was explained that the Portfolio Holder Dashboards would be available once the new corporate plan, incorporating the new portfolio structure, was finalised. KPIs for each service were still available for members, but were not being presented to panels at this stage. New dashboards would be produced in due course, and officers undertook to provide the latest performance data to members shortly.

The Portfolio Holder was asked to what extent the Council collaborated with CANF on using funding for partnership working on projects such as domestic abuse or debt relief etc. In answer, the Portfolio Holder explained that partnership working with CANF was an ongoing process, with an NFDC officer sitting on the CANF board, which fostered good relationships and helped deliver the best outcome for local people. Furthermore, officers ensured that any Government funding was obtained whenever it was available.

25 WORK PROGRAMME**RESOLVED:**

That the Work Programme be approved.

26 DATES FOR FUTURE MEETINGS**RESOLVED:**

That the following dates be agreed for meetings of the Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel in 2023/24:

(Thursdays at 10am)

27 June 2024
19 September 2024
21 November 2024
23 January 2025
20 March 2025

CHAIRMAN

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Supporting the New Forest Community

Resources and
Transformation Overview
and Scrutiny Panel
21st September 2023

citizens
advice

New Forest

Our Purpose

Why we exist.

To provide free, confidential advice to help people overcome their problems and campaign on big issues when their voices need to be heard.



We're local and national

- We're a network of 280 local Citizens Advice with 2,588 locations across England and Wales.
- Give us access to the infrastructure to manage the New Forest case loads
- Enables us to provide the most up to date training for our volunteers



Where we work in the Forest

- Five offices in the New Forest
**Hythe, Lymington, New Milton,
Ringwood and Totton**
- Attend 5 hubs
- Support 10 Larders Hubs
- Two Trussell Trust Foodbanks



Citizens Advice New Forest Team

- We are supported by 68 Volunteers, who donate approximately 22 hours a month or 1,496 hours a year
- Staff - 8 generalist advice, 19 project based programmes



Our year at Citizens Advice New Forest

Our Impact in 2022/23

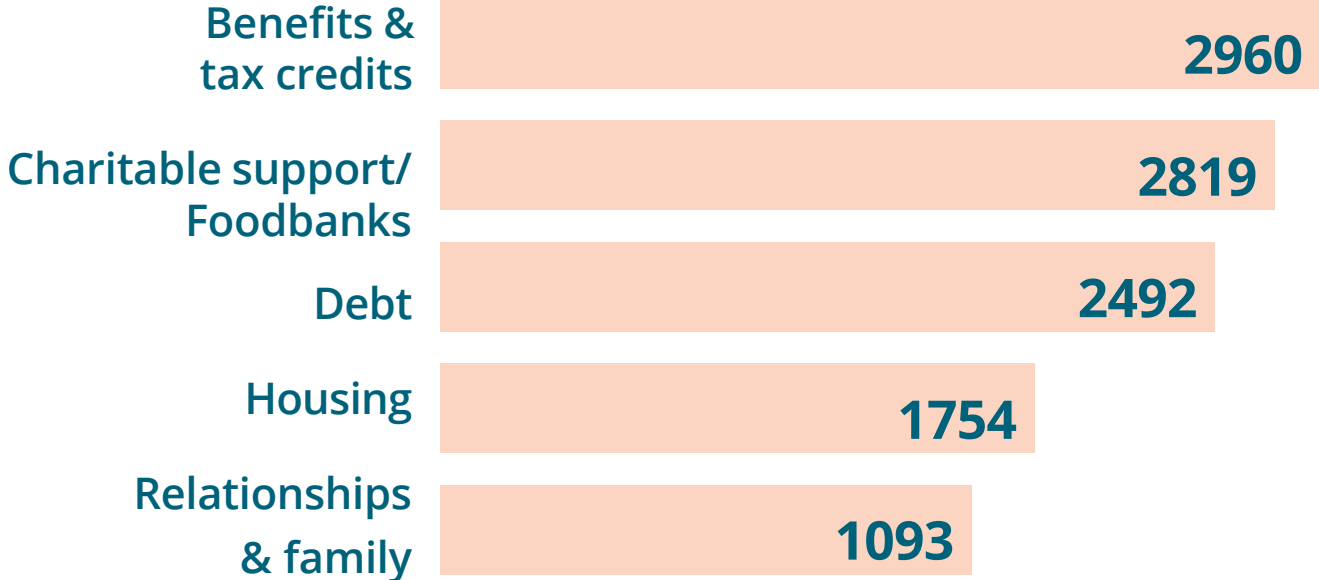


We helped **5,239** people
46% with long term health condition and 8% disabled

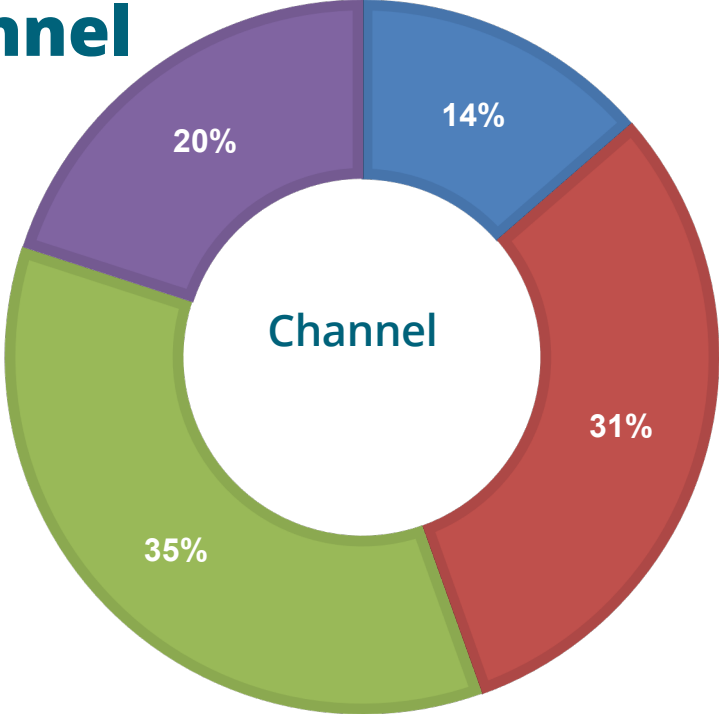
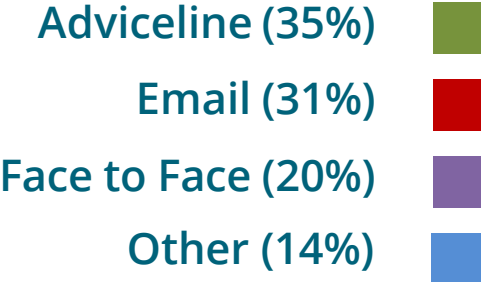


We helped clients with **19,539** issues. Clients are coming to us with an increasingly complex and multiple range of problems.

Top 5 Issues



Advice by channel



Our advice to clients is delivered to high standards. We work to AQS standards and achieved green rating in 2021/22. We are a local independent charity. We achieved top audit scores for the way we run our charity and manage our finances.

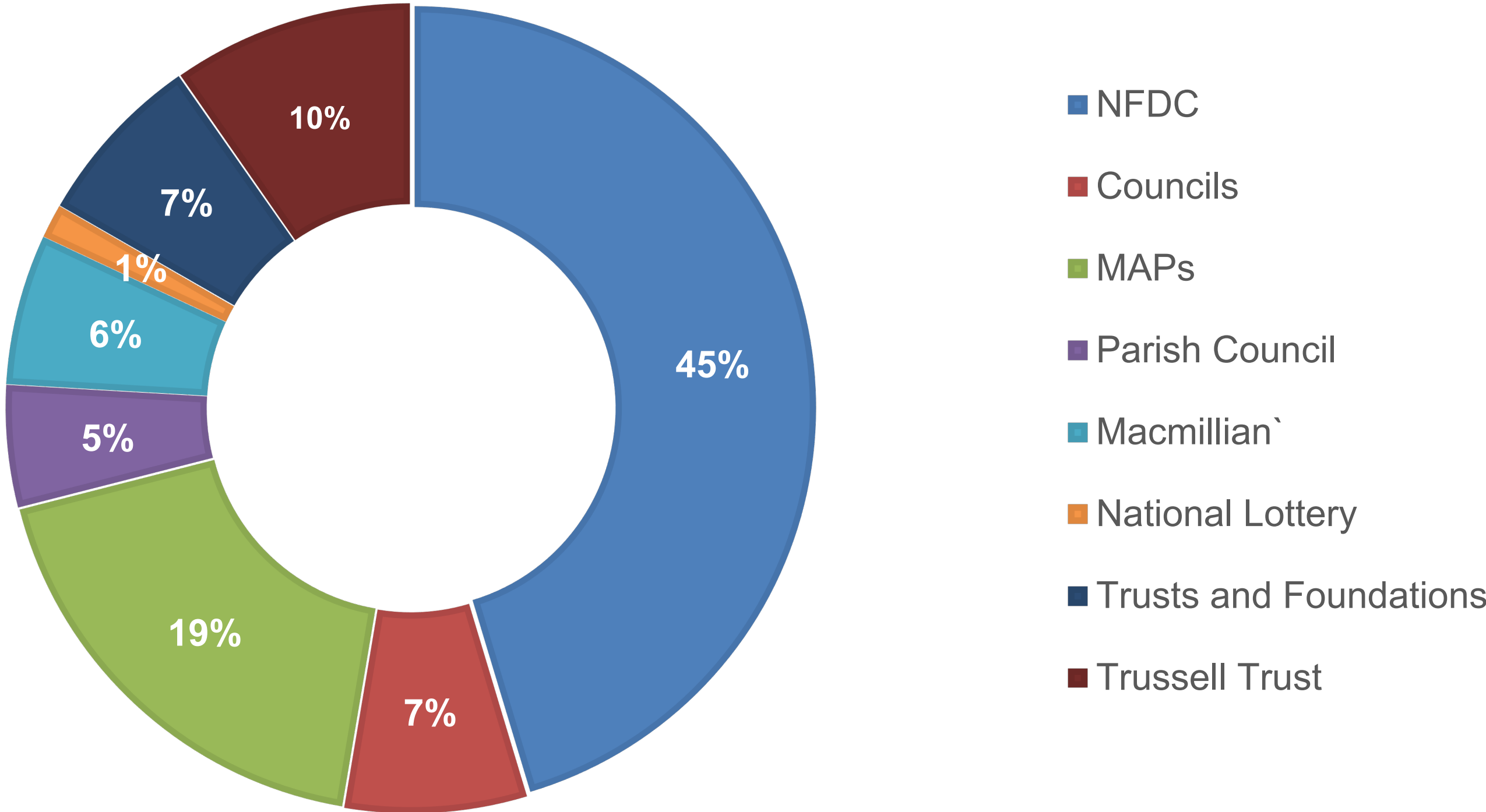
The outcomes we achieve for our clients



Through our advice we were able to deliver financial outcomes of **£1.2 million** for people living in the New Forest

Income gained	£709,183.00
Reimbursements	£23,107.00
Debts Written off	£284,605.00
Repayments rescheduled	£79,094.00
Other	£112,659.00

How we were funded in 2022/23



David's story

The Issue

David was a young man who found himself homeless after an abusive relationship. He was placed in temporary accommodation and his mental health was declining

Our Support

- Benefits check
- Contacted both his GP and Mental Health Team
- Liaised with NFDC's housing team
- Worked with partners to furnish his new home

Outcomes

- Increased his income
- Found a new home, so his son could live with him
- Improved his mental health



Financial Inclusion :

Where we work:

- Two Foodbanks (Ringwood and Waterside)
- 10 Larders
- Eight Schools (across Ringwood and Fordingbridge)



¹⁸What we deliver:

- Benefits checks and income maximisation
- Budgeting support
- Referrals on other support

Gethin's story

The Issue

Gethin had a history of alcoholism and getting into trouble with the police. His partner died unexpectedly leaving him homeless, in debt, with a young son and no job.

Our Support

- Financial Assessment
- Benefits Check
- Food and Fuel Vouchers
- Referred him to the Food Larders
- Apply for Debt Relief Order

Outcomes

- Worked to having his debts written off
- Son is now living with father
- Able to manage his money better
- Getting help for his drinking

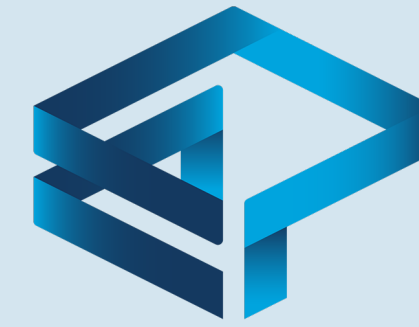


Supporting people in Debt:

MAPS

We help people to improve their financial wellbeing and build a better, more confident future by providing a specialised debt advice service

Support available in all our New Forest offices

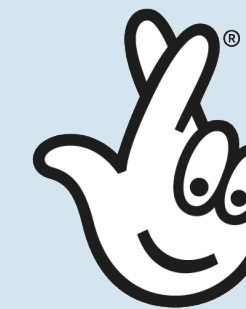


**Money &
Pensions
Service**

²⁰Hampshire Debt Project

A three year project to support the most vulnerable people who have considerable debt across Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

Advocate for them with debtors to reorganise their debt and supporting the person to manage their money.



**COMMUNITY
FUND**

Debbie's story

The Issue

Following the breakdown in relationship Debbie found herself in debt. She owed money to both her energy company and NFDC for Council Tax

Our Support

- Review of all debts
- Benefits Check
- Supported her to get an accurate meter reading
- Negotiated a repayment plan with NFDC

Outcomes

- Got a refund on her energy bill
- Reduced her outgoings so she could afford to pay her debt
- Encouraged her to seek employment



Energy advice

Energy Advice Project

One to one energy advice clients who are in or at risk of fuel poverty and struggling to pay their bills. Energy advice includes advice on fuel options, tariffs, energy grants, as well energy efficiency advice, with the aim of reducing their bills.

Household Support Fund

Hampshire residents, who would otherwise struggle with energy, food and water bills, can qualify for a grant from the Household Support Fund. This fund is specifically to help with energy bills. CANF administrates the fund for residents living in the New Forest.



Rita and Sam

The Issue

A retired couple living in a council owned flat were on a prepaid meter and hadn't received their Warm Home discount and they were facing hardship

Our Support

- Food and Fuel Voucher
- Contacted their energy supplier
- Checked whether they were entitled to other financial support

Outcomes

- Got them the warm home discount they were entitled to



Health and Wellbeing

Macmillian

Supporting people who have been affected with Cancer with financial management and supporting with accessing the benefits they are entitled to

Home and Well

Working with residents who are returning after a stay in hospital to ensure they have a comfortable home environment that will help them continue to recover and try alleviate any risks that might lead them to relapse and return to hospital.



Research and Campaigns

- Research and Campaign Manager funded through Trussell Trust
- Chair the New Forest Cost of Living Steering group
- Research to hear the views of people with lived experience



Trends we are seeing

- Increase in demand for Food and Fuel vouchers
- Profile of people with sizeable debt is changing
- Cost of Living will continue add pressure to our service
- More people with mental health issues needing our support



Any Questions?

Neil Young

Co@citizensadvicenewforest.org.uk

A blue circular logo with a white speech bubble tail pointing downwards and to the left. The text "citizens advice" is written in white, lowercase, sans-serif font inside the circle.

**citizens
advice**

New Forest

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