

NOTICE OF MEETING

Meeting:	RESOURCES AND TRANSFORMATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL
Date and Time:	THURSDAY, 16 NOVEMBER 2023, AT 10.00 AM
Place:	COUNCIL CHAMBER - APPLETREE COURT, BEAULIEU ROAD, LYNDHURST, SO43 7PA
Enquiries to:	Email: andy.rogers@nfdc.gov.uk Andy Rogers Tel: 023 8028 5070

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION:

Members of the public may watch this meeting live on the [Council's website](#).

Members of the public may speak in accordance with the Council's public participation scheme:

- (a) on items within the Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel's terms of reference which are not on the public agenda; and/or
- (b) on individual items on the public agenda, when the Chairman calls that item. Speeches may not exceed three minutes.

Anyone wishing to speak should contact the name and number shown above no later than 12.00 noon on Monday, 13 November 2023.

Kate Ryan
Chief Executive

Appletree Court, Lyndhurst, Hampshire. SO43 7PA
www.newforest.gov.uk

This agenda can be viewed online (<https://democracy.newforest.gov.uk>).

It can also be made available on audio tape, in Braille and large print.

AGENDA

Apologies

1. MINUTES

To confirm the minutes of the meeting held on 21 September 2023 as a correct record.

2. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

To receive any public participation in accordance with the Council's public participation scheme.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

To note any declarations of interest made by members in connection with an agenda item. The nature of the interest must also be specified.

Members are asked to discuss any possible interests with Democratic Services prior to the meeting.

4. COMPLAINTS ANNUAL REPORT (Pages 3 - 22)

To receive an annual overview of complaints received, and dealt with, by the Council's information Governance and Complaints Team.

5. DRAFT CORPORATE PLAN FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION (Pages 23 - 42)

To consider the draft Corporate Plan for public consultation.

6. TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY UPDATE (PRESENTATION)

To receive a presentation update on progress with the Transformation Strategy.

7. COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEMES TASK AND FINISH GROUP REPORT (Pages 43 - 60)

To consider the final report of the Council Tax Reduction Schemes Task and Finish Group.

8. FINANCIAL STRATEGY TASK AND FINISH GROUP REPORT (Pages 61 - 66)

To receive the report of the Financial Strategy Task and Finish Group.

9. PORTFOLIO HOLDERS' UPDATES

An opportunity for the Portfolio Holders to provide any updates to the Panel on developments within their portfolio.

10. WORK PROGRAMME (Pages 67 - 72)

To agree the work programme to guide the Panel's activities over the coming months.

11. ANY OTHER ITEMS WHICH THE CHAIRMAN DECIDES ARE URGENT

To:

Councillors

Alan O'Sullivan (Chairman)
Barry Dunning (Vice-Chairman)
Alan Alvey
Jack Davies
Jacqui England

Councillors

David Millar
Barry Rickman
Alex Wade
Christine Ward

RESOURCES AND TRANSFORMATION OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL – 16 NOVEMBER 2023

REVIEW OF COMPLAINTS 2022/23

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.1 That members note the contents of the report including the trends and total number of complaints;
- 1.2 That officers respond appropriately to customers who have not received the expected level of service and implement learning that has been identified.

2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 This report provides an overview of complaints received, and dealt with, by the Council's Information Governance and Complaints Team during the period 1 April 2022–31 March 2023. It also covers complaints where either the Local Government and Social Care or the Housing Ombudsman have been involved. Some comparisons with previous years are included.
- 2.2 This report also includes examples of some of the compliments/ positive feedback that have been received by Council officers during the period 1 April 2022–31 March 2023.

3. PROCEDURE AND RECORDING OF COMPLAINTS

- 3.1 The Council's Corporate Complaints Procedure can be found on the Council's [website](#). The Council currently operates a 3 level complaints procedure, with the exception of complaints made by Council tenants about the Council as their landlord, where a 2 level complaints procedure is followed in accordance with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.
- 3.2 For general corporate complaints:
 - A Level 1 complaint is dealt with by the relevant Service Manager;
 - If the complainant is not satisfied with the Service Manager's response, the complaint is dealt with at Level 2 by the Strategic Director or Assistant Director (in consultation with the Strategic Director); and
 - If the complainant remains dissatisfied, they may pursue their complaint to Level 3, where it is reviewed by the Strategic Director of Housing, Communities and Governance on behalf of the Chief Executive.
- 3.3 For housing corporate complaints (by Council tenants about the Council as their landlord):
 - A Level 1 complaint is dealt with by the relevant Service Manager (in consultation with the Assistant Director);and
 - If the complainant remains dissatisfied, they may pursue their complaint straight to Level 3, where it is reviewed by the Strategic Director of Housing,

Communities and Governance on behalf of the Chief Executive.

- 3.4 A tiered approach to complaints is commonplace amongst other authorities and in line with current Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman and Housing Ombudsman advice.

4. COMPLAINTS FOR 2022/23

- 4.1 Please see the following appendices which provide a breakdown of complaints information for 2022/23.

- **Appendix 1** - Complaints received by the Council by service area.
- **Appendix 2** – Decisions made by the Local Government and Social Care or the Housing Ombudsman.
- **Appendix 3** – Complaints found to be justified locally and financial settlements by service area.

- 4.2 Additionally, **Appendix 4** has been prepared to provide a visual representation of trends in relation to corporate complaints. This covers the last 5 years with a comparison of the total number of complaints per year, together with a comparison between complaints by service area and findings locally for the years 2021/22 and 2022/23.

- 4.3 It will be noted that a total of 96 complaints were received and logged in 2022/23, compared with 89 in 2021/22, 73 in 2020/21, 78 in 2019/20 and 97 in 2018/19.

5. COMPLAINTS TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND SOCIAL CARE OR THE HOUSING OMBUDSMAN

- 5.1 The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman and the Housing Ombudsman will generally not investigate a complaint unless the complainant has exhausted all stages of a Council's Corporate Complaints Procedure. However, there are instances where complainants contact an Ombudsman directly without having exhausted the Council's complaints procedure and, therefore, in **Appendix 1**, there is an example where a complaint is being recorded as having started at the Ombudsman without being recorded as having progressed to Level 3. The Council is also not always made aware of every complaint or enquiry made to an Ombudsman.

- 5.2 On 19 July 2023, the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman wrote to the Council with its annual review letter, providing statistical information regarding complaints received about the Council.

- 5.3 The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman recorded the following for 2022/23:

- Complaints and enquiries received: 10
- Complaints decided: 12

- 5.4 Of the 12 complaints which were subject to a final decision, only four were subject to detailed investigations and, of those, two complaints were upheld (50%). These were both complaints related to the Council's Housing Options Service and one case resulted in injustice. However, it should be noted that the Council has taken steps to compensate the complainant and has complied with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's recommendations in full. The average number of

complaints upheld in similar authorities was 59%.

5.5 For the year 2022/23 there was 1 decision made by the Housing Ombudsman. This related to the application of the Council's unreasonable complainant policy (contained within the Corporate Complaints Procedure). This decision was pending from the Housing Ombudsman for several months. This complaint was not upheld.

5.6 Further detail regarding decisions made by both the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman and the Housing Ombudsman is provided in **Appendix 2**

6. HOUSING OMBUDSMAN'S COMPLAINT HANDLING CODE

6.1 In July 2020 the Housing Ombudsman published a Complaint Handling Code ('the Code'). This Code was introduced to provide a high-level framework to support landlords in handling housing related complaints. One of the requirements of the Code is that landlords carry out regular self-assessments against it and take appropriate action to ensure that complaint handling is in line with the Code.

6.2 The Housing Ombudsman conducted a review of the Code one year after it took effect to strengthen and support a positive complaint handling culture. The changes took effect from 1 April 2022 and all landlords had until 1 October 2022 to become compliant. The Council's self-assessment was last updated in March 2023 and is published on the Council's [website](#).

6.3 Whilst this report covers the period 1 April 2022–31 March 2023, a recent development is that both the Housing Ombudsman and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman have launched a consultation on a proposed joint complaint handling code, with a view to such code coming into effect from 1 April 2024. In accordance with the recently enacted Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023, the Code will also become a statutory requirement. Further updates on this, and any required changes to the Council's Corporate Complaints Procedure and practices will be reported to members next year.

7. LEARNING FROM COMPLAINTS

7.1 Learning from complaints received is a key outcome expected from the Council's complaint handling. It remains important for Services to review each complaint received and, where appropriate, to take action to avoid or to minimise complaints of a similar nature.

7.2 Complaint responses should address underlying clauses and ensure changes to practices are put in place. Where identified changes and improvements relate to more than one service this should be actioned.

7.3 The Information Governance and Complaints Team assists managers with ensuring learning outcomes are implemented. The Team also stays informed on learning identified from other authorities and guidance issued from the Housing Ombudsman and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman to ensure that applicable best practice is shared with services.

8. COMPLIMENTS

8.1 The Information Governance and Complaints Team has asked Service Managers to pass on compliments and positive feedback that officers receive so that this can be logged and reported to Strategic Directors and members. A compliments inbox (compliments@nfdc.gov.uk) has also been set up to assist with this.

8.2 It is important to recognise the good work that officers of the Council do, as well as identifying where improvements can be made. The Council's Chief Executive is supportive of this and has also encouraged Service Managers to pass this information on.

8.3 **Appendix 5** has been prepared with a summary of some of the positive feedback that was received in the financial year 2022/23. The Information Governance and Complaints Team will continue to promote this.

9. CONCLUSIONS

9.1 The Council's Corporate Complaints Procedure continues to provide a robust system for investigating and resolving complaints.

9.2 It is important that all services of the Council accurately record complaints received and notify the Information Governance and Complaints Team so that proper records are maintained and action monitored.

9.3 The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman has upheld two complaints for the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023. Both were regarding the Housing Options Service. There have been no complaints upheld by the Housing Ombudsman during this period.

10. DATA PROTECTION/ FINANCIAL/ CRIME & DISORDER/ ENVIRONMENTAL/ EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

10.1 There are none directly arising from the report.

For further information please contact:

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or

Karen Grimes
Information Compliance and Complaints Officer
Legal Services
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Email: karen.grimes@nfdc.gov.uk

Background Papers:

Public documents and
exempt info

NUMBER OF NEW COMPLAINTS BY SERVICE AREA 2022/23

Service	Complaints received	Progressed to level 3	Progressed to Ombudsman and Housing Ombudsman	Started at Ombudsman
Housing, Communities and Governance				
Information Governance and Complaints	0			
Legal	0			
Housing Options, Rents, Support and Private Sector Housing	18	8	4	
Housing- Maintenance	10	3		
Housing- Compliance and Asset Management	4			
Housing – Strategy & Development	2			
Housing – Estate Management and Community Support	10	3		1
Environmental and Regulation	6	2		
Democratic Services	0			
Corporate Resources and Transformation				
Human Resources	0			
Procurement	0			
ICT	0			
Revenues and Benefits	4	1		
Customer Services	1			
Finance	0			
Business Development and Elections	0			
Estates and Valuation	0			
Place, Operations and Sustainability				
Building Control	0			
Coastal	0			
Enforcement and Amenities	11	3	1	

Planning – Development Management and Enforcement	10	4	1	
Planning – Policy & Strategy	0		1	
Waste and Transport	13			
Grounds and Streetscene	7			
Total	96	24	7	

DECISIONS MADE BY THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND SOCIAL CARE OMBUDSMAN OR HOUSING OMBUDSMAN BY SERVICE AREA 2022/23

Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

Service	Ombudsman	Details	Ombudsman's Decision
Housing Options	3	Complaint about the way in which the Council dealt with the complainant's homelessness and housing applications. The complaint also stated interim and temporary accommodation was unsuitable for the complainant's needs, along with delays and failure to manage their applications properly.	Not upheld: No fault
		Complaint regarding the advice given to the complainant by the Council about their entitlement to benefit support with their housing costs, and the accuracy of the information the Council submitted with their application for universal credit.	Upheld: Fault No Injustice The Ombudsman found fault as an incorrect figure was used in an internal affordability assessment. This fault did not cause the complainant any injustice. No fault was found regarding the submission of the universal credit claim.
		Complaint regarding the Council's handling of the complainant's request to be placed in accommodation closer to their support network following a change in their circumstances.	Upheld: Fault Injustice The Ombudsman found fault with the Council for failing to provide suitable alternative accommodation in a reasonable timeframe, following a change in complainant's circumstances which required a move of area. The complainant required a move as their support network had recently moved away. No fault was found regarding the size and condition of the property itself.

			<p>Recommended action:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apologise to complainant. • Pay £550 (£50 per month from February 2022 onwards) to reflect the time the complainant had been living in unsuitable temporary accommodation following the change in circumstances. • Continue to pay £50 per month for each month the complainant remains in their current accommodation (these payments will stop if they refuse an offer of suitable alternative accommodation). • Continue to explore whether there is any suitable alternative temporary accommodation for the complainant until they secure a permanent property. <p>Current position: Following the Ombudsman's decision, the Housing Service allocated a single point of contact to work with the complainant. In agreement with the complainant the Council committed to securing alternative accommodation. The complainant's circumstances have since changed again, and they have decided to remain in the current property. Officers are exploring some minor adaptations to the current home.</p>
Development Management (Planning)	1	The complainant stated that the Council should have required an area of public open space to be wheelchair accessible. They also complained that they were not allowed to speak about the issue at a meeting of the Council's cabinet.	<p>Not upheld: No maladministration.</p> <p>There was no fault in the way the Council made its decisions.</p>
Total	4		

Housing Ombudsman

Service	Housing Ombudsman	Details	Housing Ombudsman's Decision
Information Governance and Complaints	1	The complainant is complaining that they were previously classified as a persistent and unreasonable complainant.	Not upheld: No maladministration by the Council in respect of its decision to extend the resident's unreasonable complainant status.
Total	1		

NUMBER OF COMPLAINTS CONSIDERED JUSTIFIED OR PARTLY JUSTIFIED INTERNALLY - 2022/23

Service	Total Complaints	Total Justified or Partly Justified including delay in dealing with complaint	Further information	Financial settlements
Housing, Communities and Governance				
Information Governance and Complaints	0			
Legal	0			
Housing Options, Rents, Support and Private Sector Housing	18	3	Complaint regarding suitability and size of property of large family with complex additional needs. Property extension agreed to meet needs.	
			Complainant's personal belongings disposed of in error from temporary accommodation. Apology provided and procedures changed.	£6,000 comprising storage costs, printer/stationary costs/ overpayment of rent, hardship, and compensation for lost possessions.
			Complaint that workmanship on installation of wetroom related to disabled facilities grant was not properly inspected by the Council on completion. Apology provided.	£1,250 goodwill payment and payment towards repair costs.
Housing Maintenance	10	6	Complaint regarding property defects. Apology provided for delay and visit arranged to assess works required.	
			Complaint regarding response to concerns raised regarding damaged fence and fence subsequently failing causing damage to complainant's property. Apology provided.	£100 time and trouble payment.
			Complaint regarding refusal of minor works application. Application reassessed and permission granted.	

			Complaint about impact of Council installed light on complainant's property. Apology provided and light adjusted.	
			Delays experienced in identifying drainage issues and completion of disabled facility grants works. Apology provided and outstanding works completed.	
			Delay experienced in progressing work order for cracked glazing. Apology provided and outstanding works completed.	
Housing- Compliance and Asset Management	4	3	Complainant incorrectly advised kitchen would be replaced. Apology provided.	£275 time and trouble payment.
			Delay with identifying and repairing damp and mould issue at property. Apology provided.	£1,750 payment to reimburse decoration costs incurred by complainant and £1,250 for additional heating costs and inconvenience.
			Complaint regarding length of time to complete kitchen installation and disruption caused. Apology provided and contractor no longer instructed.	£100 goodwill payment.
Housing Strategy and Development	2	2	2 x Complaints about damage caused by contractor building works. Apology provided and contractor responding to complainants directly.	
Housing- Estate Management and Community Support	10	3	Complaint regarding handling of anti-social behavior complaints. Management move for tenant agreed based on circumstances of case.	
			Complaint regarding handling of complaints relating to condition and maintenance issues at neighbouring property. Maintenance issues addressed.	
			Complaint regarding response to rat infestation at property. Management move for tenant agreed to allow resolution of issue.	£1,055 payment for damage to personal possessions and £1,500 goodwill payment for time and trouble.
Environmental and Regulation	6	0		
Democratic Services	0			

Corporate Resources and Transformation				
Human Resources	0			
Procurement	0			
Revenues and Benefits	4	2	Delay in paying community grant awarded. Apology provided, funding agreement issued and update to procedures.	
			Complaint regarding conduct of officer and delay with recognising formal complaint. Apology provided and request made for employees to refresh training.	
Customer Services	1	1	Complaint regarding delay in delivery of glass recycling box and conduct of officer. Apology provided and box delivered.	
Finance	0			
Business Development and Elections	0			
Estates and Valuation	0			
Place, Operations and Sustainability				
Building Control	0			
Coastal	0			
Enforcement and Amenities	11	8	Complaint regarding removal of posters for community event. Apology provided and procedures reviewed.	£250 payments to two community clubs for time and trouble and lost posters.
			Complaint regarding inconsistency of parking fines related to display of parking clock. Apology provided.	Fine waived.
			Complaint regarding action and conduct of officers relating to alleged abandoned vehicle. Apology provided and processes reviewed.	
			Complaint regarding removal of alleged abandoned vehicle from outside keeper's home. Vehicle returned, apology provided, and processes reviewed.	

			Complaint about issue of Fixed Penalty Notice for fly-tipping relating to household waste and conduct of officer during telephone call. Notice withdrawn and complainant advised of household waste timings.	
			Complaint regarding service relating to mooring and missing out on relevant communication allowing complainant to benefit from 10% discount to mooring fee. Apology provided.	10% refund on mooring fee given.
			Complaint about inconsistent communication. Apology provided.	
			Complaint about inconsistent communication. Apology provided and case reviewed.	
Planning – Development Management and Enforcement	10	1	Complaint regarding email address being published on planning website. Apology provided and checking processes updated.	
Planning – Policy & Strategy	0			
Waste and Transport	13	4	Complaint regarding driving of Council vehicle. Apology provided and investigation into incident.	
			Complaint regarding conduct of refuse operative damaging glass collection box. Apology and replacement box provided, waste collected and training to operative.	
			Complaint regarding multiple missed garden waste collections and lack of communication. Apology provided.	£5 goodwill payment
			Complaint that location used to pick up all refuse from street was outside complainant's property and previous requests not addressed. Apology provided and letter sent to all residents confirming correct collection location.	
Grounds and Streetscene	7	3	Complaint regarding former tenant's refuse not being collected following agreement. Apology provided, refuse removed and training to officers.	

			Complaint regarding responsiveness of corporate tree team to request to remove branches. Apology and explanation provided.	
			Complaint regarding responsiveness of corporate tree team regarding tree causing concern. Apology and explanation provided.	
Total	96	36		11

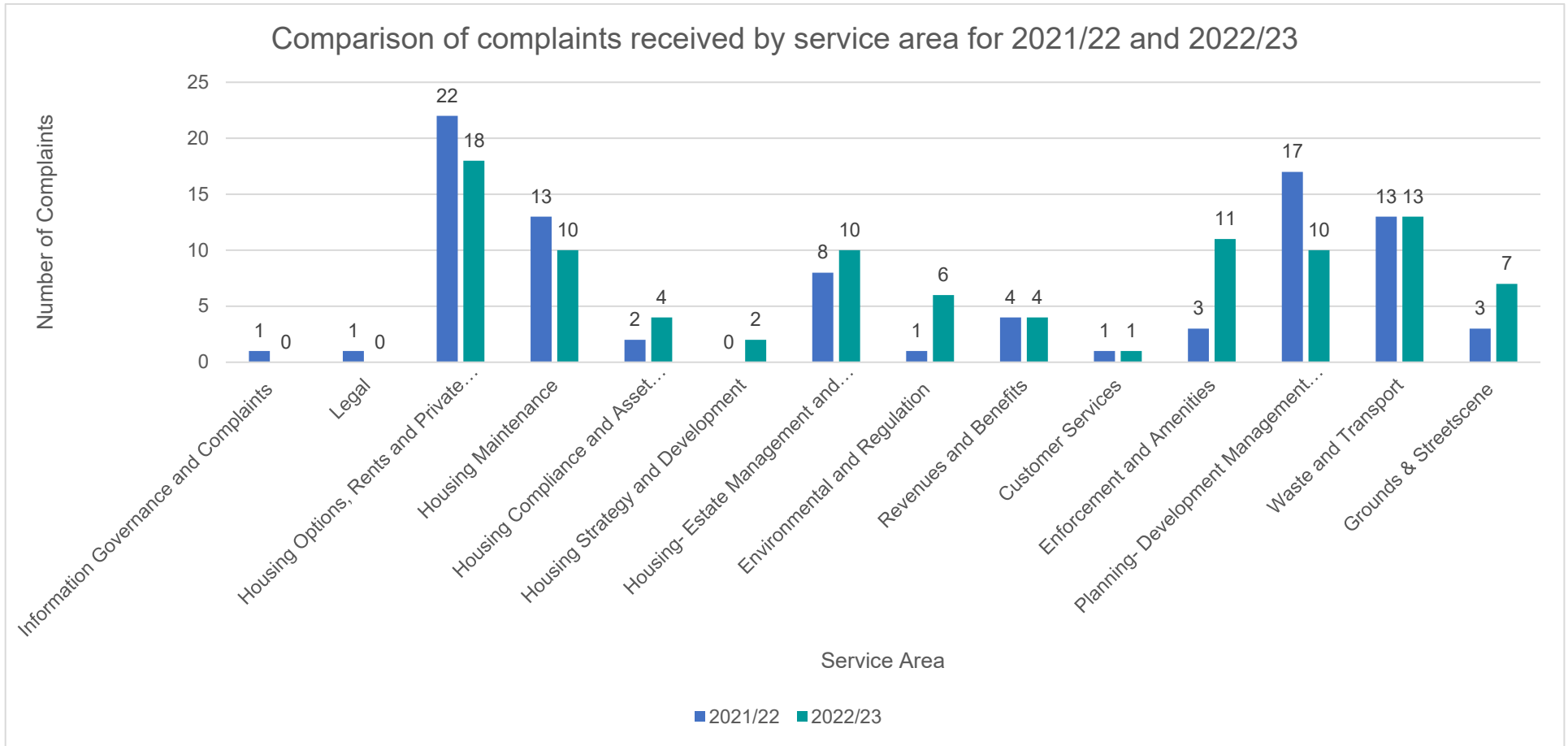
1. COMPARISON OF TOTAL NUMBER OF COMPLAINTS PER YEAR

Total number of complaints received 2018/2019, 2019/2020, 2020/2021, 2021/2022 and 2022/2023



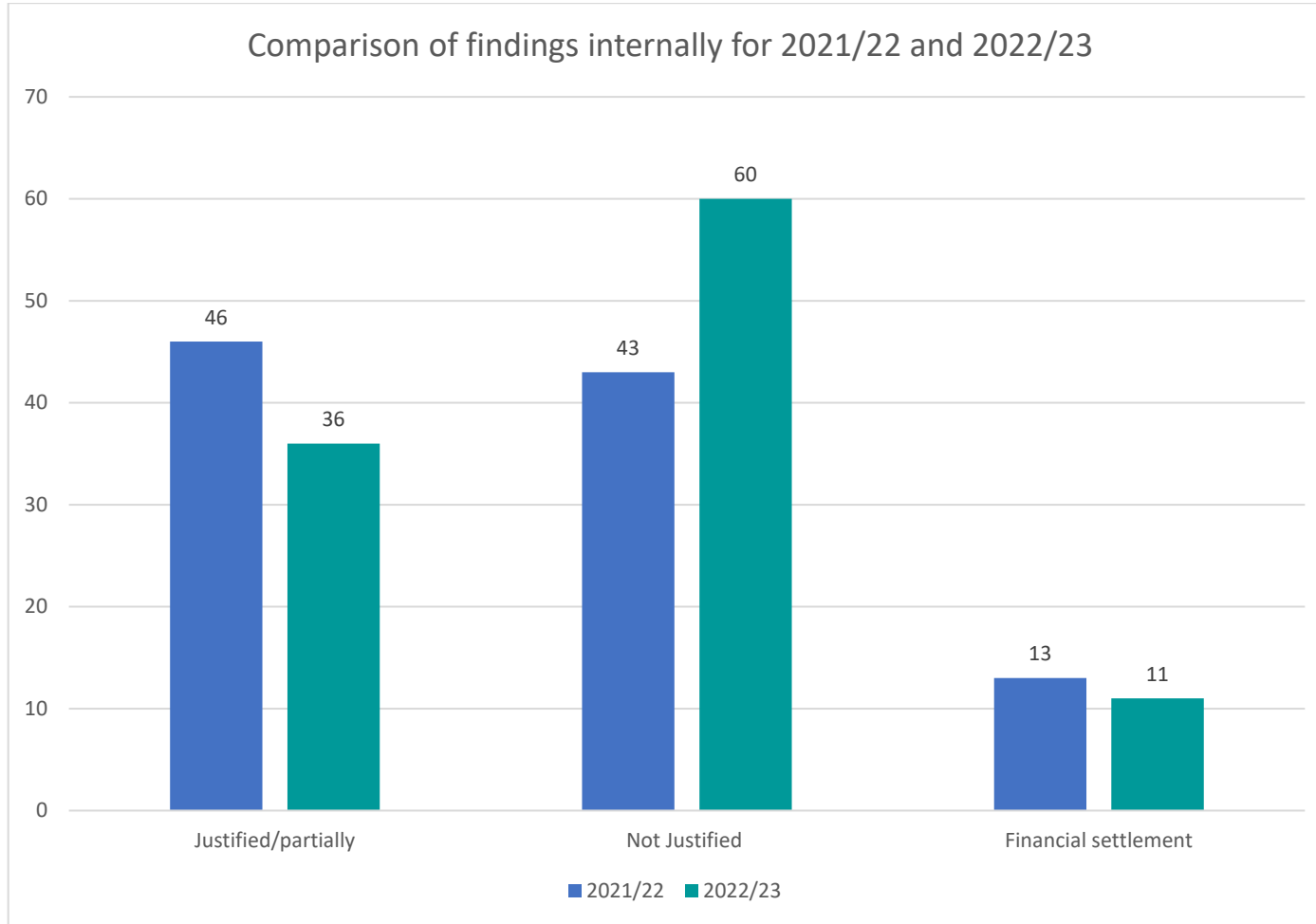
Total number of complaints received in 2022/2023 is 96, this is increase of 7.9% from 2021/2022 when there was 89.

2. COMPARISON OF COMPLAINTS RECEIVED BY SERVICE AREA FOR 2021/2022 AND 2022/2023



3. COMPARISON OF FINDINGS INTERNALLY FOR 2021/2022 AND 2022/2023

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SUMMARY OF COMPLIMENTS/ POSITIVE FEEDBACK RECEIVED BY SERVICES FOR 2022/23

Below are quotes or summaries of some of the compliments/ positive feedback received for Council officers.

HOUSING OPTIONS, RENTS, SUPPORT AND PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING

- “Thank for all your help and time looking at my case. It was very kind of you to try and help. I totally appreciate your decision”.
- “Thank you so much for all of your support and for supporting [Client name] allotment form. You really have been truly amazing!!”
- “Thank you to [Officer name] my family and I are infinitely grateful to you for your help in finding our new home. thank you for your financial support and for everything you have done for us! If it wasn't for the war in our country, we wouldn't have had to look for a new home and start all over again, but the country of Great Britain and its incredible people helped us start living a normal life again, and our children are safe and can study at school. for us, this is incredibly great support both from your side and from the side of the state! so please convey a big thank you from our whole family”
- “You really have been a fantastic help to me and I couldn't be more grateful for everything you have done. I appreciate it immensely- thank you every so much.”
- “Everything is looking so much better now already and it's nice to be able to breathe again”
- “Thank you for all your help [Officer name] it's been greatly appreciated more then you know.”
- “Many thanks for your care and attention”
- “I'm always happy to send you my gratitude and heartfelt regards”
- “Thank you received from external support services team- I wanted to pass on our sincere thanks for the work you have done with both of us in helping [Client name] get [their] life on the right path. We are extremely pleased to say that all referencing is now done, and a contract has been signed today. [Client name] moves in on [date] although it is a complete empty shell not even a curtain or mattress and [they] owns nothing other than the clothes on [their] back, that said and most importantly what it is for [Client name] is [their] very 1st front door that [they] is responsible for which is amazing, and I can't personally thank you enough. You have both been amazing and we felt it important to say so”

HOUSING MAINTENANCE

- “I just wanted to feed back my compliments to the men who came and fixed the trellis. They were polite/tidy/efficient and did a really good job.”
- “The new windows are brilliant the smaller window at the top is a brilliant idea. It has really helped me feel more secure and it's brilliant so I can't thank you enough absolutely perfect”
- “I would like to say a massive thank you for my bathroom”
- Thank you to NFDC plumber who attended replaced a radiator-he was polite, efficient and let the tenant know exactly what he was doing and Heating works much better now.
- “I would just like to express my thanks to you [Officer name] and the maintenance team for their work today. Every single trade turned up on time and ready to get the job done in a friendly and professional manner. Thankfully it certainly seems like the work carried out today has resolved the heating issues at last. Just thought that after all the negative emails back and forth with further issues, it was about time for some well deserved praise. Please pass on our thanks to those involved today despite the grumpy neighbours”

ESTATES MANAGEMENT & SUPPORT

- “Thank you again for your swift and prompt assistance with this”
- “I was feeling very overwhelmed by all this but you have made me feel better about it, just by listening to my needs. I really appreciate that! Thank you”
- “Thank you so much for your help, the food bank was amazing and had really taken lots of stress away. I cannot thank you enough, I'm so very grateful to you”
- “Thank you for your help and support recently [Officer name]. The new home is lovely”
- Regarding joint working with one of our partner agencies- “It has been a real pleasure to work with yourselves this last half a year or so”

COASTAL

- “The railings guys certainly work extremely well, the curve on the railings does make the huts look attractive”
- “May I also take this opportunity to thank you and the Team for the detailed update regarding the Milford on Sea Handrail Project. It provided answers to the many

questions relating to the project tender process, costing and development timelines etc. I wasn't keen on the idea but great job and very safe"

- "Thank you to the Coastal team for regular updates regarding the various projects affecting the Milford Beach huts- we know lots goes on behind the scenes to ensure we are happy hutters. The website is excellent."
- "I wish to convey my sincere thanks to your surveyors who were working at Hurst Spit, my wife fell and your team stopped and offered assistance for which we were very grateful"

PLANNING/ DEVELOPMENT CONTROL

- Compliments received from an agent to the department:

"I continue to tell my clients that your Planning department is the best to deal with. You are always efficient, reliable, and reasonable, and regularly send out decisions earlier than the due date.

Thank you for your help and also that from your colleagues. Please convey my good feedback to them.

You're the best Local Authority to deal with in the areas I deal with".

CCTV AND COMMUNITY ALARMS

- "I just wanted to get in touch to pass on my sincere thanks to you and your team. Especially [officer name] who was on the receiving end of the telephone. I got home after a very long day in a new role to find out that my lounge/ kitchen door completely jammed. I removed all of the door furniture, no luck getting in. I was particularly upset that I could not reach my medication which lives in my kitchen...The very calm and considerate [Officer name] handled me with kindness and quick decision making. Thank you so much to all that have helped me tonight".

RESOURCES AND TRANSFORMATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL – 16 NOVEMBER 2023

DRAFT CORPORATE PLAN FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.1 The Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel consider the Corporate Plan 2024-2028 Consultation Draft for approval by Cabinet.

2. INTRODUCTION & PURPOSE

- 2.1 Following the 2023 elections, the Cabinet has now considered its strategic plan for the period of the administration, resulting in the production of a draft Corporate Plan for 2024 to 2028.
- 2.2 The Corporate Plan is the single most important strategy that shapes the way the Council works and defines its ambitions. In doing so it brings together strategic and service objectives, helping the organisation to work towards the same vision, values and priorities.
- 2.3 It will be underpinned by a suitable and proportionate performance management framework that will detail the plan's priorities and monitor its delivery.
- 2.4 This report proposes a draft plan for consultation before final approval of the plan by Cabinet on the 3rd April 2024.

3. DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

- 3.1 The Corporate Plan reflects the ambitions of the new political administration.
- 3.2 The plan has been informed by the administration's election manifesto, feedback from the residents survey, elected members and staff engagement.
- 3.3 Delivery of the plan over the next four years will be led by the administration, and supported by actions to address the administration's commitments and issues residents feel are important. Priorities and actions will be clearly communicated to staff to further support the delivery of the plan.

4. CORPORATE PLAN 2024-2028

- 4.1 The Corporate Plan focuses on the challenges ahead and it is these that have shaped the vision and priorities within the plan.
- 4.2 The vision of the plan is to secure a better future by supporting opportunities for the people and communities we serve, protecting our unique and special place,

and securing a vibrant and prosperous New Forest. This has been organised into the thematic areas of People, Place and Prosperity.

People Helping people in the greatest need and creating balanced, resilient, and healthy communities who feel safe and supported with easy access to services.

Place Delivering growth, opportunity and services that shape our place now and for future generations, within a unique environmental context, to ensure we remain a special place to live, work and visit.

Prosperity Promoting a strong local economy that delivers its inclusive aspirations through effective partnerships, attracting investment, and increasing skills and employment opportunities.

4.4 Each theme has a set of priorities with actions and performance measures being monitored and refreshed annually to ensure delivery of the plan.

4.5 The plan contains a clear statement of intent and is further supported by highlighting the underlying values shown below. The principles in this Corporate Plan will be instilled within the organisation through embedding these values as part of our performance framework which will ensure all aspects of the Corporate Plan cascade through our services.

Empathy We will show kindness, actively look to understand people's different needs, and ensure our services are responsive.

Honesty We will act fairly, honestly, and openly in all that we do.

Learning We will support individual development and organisational growth, learning from what we do well and where we need to improve.

Ambition We will be ambitious for our people and our place, embracing innovation and best practice.

5. CONSULTATION AND NEXT STEPS

5.1 Subject to Cabinet approval of the consultation draft at their meeting in December the plan will go out for public consultation. The consultation period will be 6 weeks concluding at the end of January 2024 and will involve publishing the plan on the Council's website. Feedback will be invited via multiple channels such as writing to us and an online form. Residents, Town & Parish Councils, and our partners will be consulted on the plan.

5.2 Due consideration will be given to consultation feedback to ensure that the priorities and intended activities are right given the context of the challenges, before final consideration by Overview and Scrutiny Panels in March and approval by Cabinet in April 2024.

5.3 Alongside the consultation, work will continue to develop the design and associated web pages which will house the approved Corporate Plan.

6. DELIVERING THE PLAN

- 6.1 The Corporate Plan sits alongside the Council's financial plans to ensure the resources are available and appropriately directed to deliver the plan. Its delivery will be supported by a proportionate performance management framework that will ensure priorities and necessary actions filter through to portfolio resource planning and service plans.
- 6.2 Primarily the plan will be communicated and reported upon electronically, as has been the case with the current plan. This will help keep cost to a minimum as well as making the plan and its delivery more accessible to those interested in specific priorities and activities. Dedicated webpages will be developed to support this.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 A clear focus of the plan is continued financial responsibility. Direct costs arising from the production and publicity of the plan will be kept to a minimum.

For Further Information Please Contact:

Background Papers

Corporate Plan 2024-2028 Consultation Draft

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Corporate Plan 2024-2028 (Consultation Draft)

Introduction to the corporate plan

This corporate plan is the overarching document that sets our vision, values, priorities, and our commitments. It describes how our services will work together towards our collective ambitions over the next four years.

New Forest District Council works together as one team with one purpose, serving our residents in the best way that we can, delivering value and improving outcomes for our communities and our unique place.

The Council is accountable to our residents and to ensure we get this plan right we have drawn on the results of a resident insight survey and taken on board contributions from members, staff and partners.

Introduction from Cllr
Jill Cleary, Leader,
New Forest District
Council



As Leader I am ambitious for our district and am delighted to present to you the New Forest District Council corporate plan for 2024 to 2028. Thank you to everyone who has supported the development of this important document through taking the time to respond to our consultation. This insight has informed our vision and priorities and we are already working hard to take these forward with a plan which is a reflection of our collective aspirations.

The New Forest is a beautiful place that has a unique offer for residents, businesses and our many visitors. As a well-established community leader, the council has long recognised the strong heritage and a world-class environment we operate within, and work to protect and enhance. Tackling climate and environmental challenges is key to ensure that the special nature of the New Forest can be enjoyed by future generations.

We also want to support the prosperity of our residents. We know there are investment opportunities to come, and it is important to me that our residents now and in the future can benefit from these opportunities. The cost of living crisis has exacerbated some of the inequalities within our communities. We have a plan that focuses on our people as well as our place and we will support our communities to feel safe and supported while being able to take every opportunity that comes the district's way.

Together we will navigate the challenges and seize the opportunities that lie ahead, ensuring our district remains a wonderful place to live, work and thrive.

Introduction from
Kate Ryan, Chief
Executive, New Forest
District Council



As chief executive my role is to ensure the successful implementation of this plan, working closely with our dedicated staff and council members to drive the strategic priorities forward.

The next four years is a critical time for us to advance the most important issues concerning our residents. Our focus is on creating thriving and safe communities and a strong economy, providing homes, and supporting the most vulnerable, responding to the climate and nature emergency, and delivering excellent services that are future proof.

Our corporate plan priorities are designed to tackle these challenges head-on. I am confident that together with our residents, business partners, and other stakeholders, we can achieve our goals by prioritising people, place, and prosperity.

At the heart of delivering our priorities is our staff. We aim to be an employer of choice and I firmly believe that having the best staff, who are well-supported, is key to delivering the best outcomes for our residents. Building on this, and to support the delivery of the commitments within this plan, our transformation programme will invest in our staff, develop the skills and infrastructure we need and modernise our services at pace to be both financially and environmentally sustainable for the future.

Our vision:



To secure a better future by supporting opportunities for the **people** and communities we serve, protecting our unique and special **place**, and securing a vibrant and **prosperous** New Forest

Our values:

Our values underpin the council's vision and priorities by shaping our behaviours and the way we work.

Empathy	We will show kindness, actively look to understand people's different needs, and ensure our services are responsive
Honesty	We will act fairly, honestly, and openly in all that we do
Learning	We will support individual development and organisational growth, learning from what we do well and where we need to improve
Ambition	We will be ambitious for our people and our place, embracing innovation and best practice

Our priority themes:



PEOPLE

Helping people in the greatest need and creating balanced, resilient, and healthy communities who feel safe and supported with easy access to services.

- Helping those in our community with the greatest need
- Empowering our residents to live healthy, connected and fulfilling lives
- Meeting housing needs



PLACE

Delivering growth, opportunity and services that shape our place now and for future generations, within a unique environmental context, to ensure we remain a special place to live, work and visit.

- Shaping our place now and for future generations
- Protecting our climate, coast, and natural world
- Caring for our facilities, neighbourhoods and open spaces in a modern and responsive way



PROSPERITY

Promoting a strong local economy that delivers its aspirations through effective partnerships, attracting investment, and increasing skills and employment opportunities

- Maximising the benefits of economic growth and investment
- Supporting our high-quality business base and economic centres to thrive and grow
- Championing skills and access to job opportunities

UNDERPINNED BY:

Investing in our people and services to meet customer needs, protecting the council's financial position, and embedding sustainability through our Future New Forest transformation programme.

- Putting our customers at the heart of what we do
- Being an employer of choice
- Being financially responsible
- Designing modern and innovative services



PEOPLE

Helping people in the greatest need and creating balanced, resilient, and healthy communities who feel safe and supported with easy access to services.

Our Priorities:

- Helping those in our community with the greatest need
- Empowering our residents to live healthy, connected and fulfilling lives
- Meeting housing needs

Introduction:

Our vision for our people in the district is one where they feel safe, supported, and can live healthy independent lives. We will continue to support our most vulnerable residents knowing that this will be most effective when we work with our partners, including the voluntary sector.

Many of our residents are feeling the effects of financial hardship and we recognise that households are finding it increasingly difficult with the cost of living, which can disproportionately affect those with the greatest needs. We will continue to work with our partners to develop community hubs, tackle food poverty, provide warm spaces and provide advice and information to support residents within our communities.

Living in fair and affordable communities is crucial for our people, and we are dedicated to enhancing the quality of housing and to ensure it remains accessible for those with lower incomes. Good quality housing fosters strong family and community ties and helps eliminate the inequality associated with poor housing and associated poor health outcomes.

Our focus and efforts will persist in providing affordable housing to our residents, while simultaneously meeting compliance with housing standards. In its capacity as a responsible landlord the council will address any necessary repairs and maintenance requirements as soon as possible. We will also maintain open communication with our tenants to better understand their concerns and act upon them.

The council is the largest provider of social rented properties in the district, and so we have a wider responsibility to ensure housing is delivered that meets the needs of our community. This will involve working with landowners and developers and wider partners to bring forward sites suitable for housing and to address associated infrastructure needs.

There are already established community groups in place, and we will nurture them to ensure that people can receive support from those within their communities, who understand local issues and can help resolve them. It is important to us that our residents feel safe, and we will continue to identify and respond to concerns to build confidence that the New Forest is a safe place to live.

Our vision for the district will preserve our community's strong sense of place through a vibrant arts and culture offer which will see a new cultural strategy being developed bringing opportunities for learning, entertainment, leisure, personal growth, and improved communication with our residents.

Priority	Helping those in our community with the greatest need	
	<p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide more quality, temporary accommodation for single people and families and work with our partners to tackle homelessness. • Ensure our housing strategy and policies supports necessary adaptations and other support that enables people to stay in their homes and to live independently. • Support community engagement, working with partners and our town and parish councils to help resolve local issues, including those associated with the cost of living 	<p>Measured by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of homelessness duty cases successfully prevented. • Number of households in external emergency accommodation. • Number of families with children under 16 in external emergency shared accommodation over 6 weeks • Maximising allocated budgets for Disabled Facility Grants (DFGs). • Number of Appletree careline customers. • Number of cost of living and community support initiatives and projects.
	<p>Delivery supported through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Homelessness strategy ➤ Housing strategy ➤ Community Strategy 	
Priority	Empowering our residents to live healthy, connected and fulfilling lives	
	<p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the health and wellbeing of our communities, working with partners to deliver increased physical activity and good mental health. • We will collaborate with partners to deliver a vibrant arts and culture offer to provide opportunities for learning, entertainment, leisure, personal growth and improved communication. • Work closely with our other public bodies to promote safety, tackle the perception of crime within our towns and parishes, and expand our CCTV coverage to include rural areas. • Conduct emergency preparedness exercises and ensure robust business continuity arrangements are in place to support community resilience in responding to incidents. • Work with our communities to understand their needs and empower them to influence the services and outcomes of their area. 	<p>Measured by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of physically inactive adults. • Investment in leisure centres (£). • Percentage of resident satisfaction on crime and safety perception measures. • Investment in and rollout of CCTV coverage. • Number of Community Safety Projects. • Number of incidents where Anti-social behaviour powers have been exercised. • Community grants value allocated and the number of people grants are designed to reach.

Delivery supported through:

- Health and wellbeing strategy
- Community safety strategy
- Community engagement strategy (tbc)
- Anti-Social behaviour strategy
- Emerging cultural strategy
- Tenant engagement strategy

Priority

Meeting housing needs

We will:

- Provide increased numbers of affordable homes by 2026 and explore innovative models with landowners, partners and developers to enable sustainable and affordable homes for the future.
- Ensure all residents in the district can benefit from energy efficiency measures and support landlords to meet efficiency standards in the private rented sector.
- Improve the energy efficiency of over 3,200 council houses by 2030.
- Work with our housing tenants to understand their needs and provide high quality service standards in line with the government's new Social Housing Charter.
- Work with developers and landowners to bring forward opportunities for wider housing provision to meet the needs of our communities, including first homes, shared ownership and other tenures.

Measured by:

- Number of affordable social housing homes delivered by NFDC and its partners.
- Number of affordable council homes delivered against the 2026 target.
- Percentage score for tenant satisfaction as determined in the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs).
- Number of council homes achieving Energy Performance Certification band C.

Delivery supported through:

- Housing strategy
- Greener housing strategy
- Tenant engagement strategy
- New Forest Local Plan



PLACE

Delivering growth, opportunity and services that shape our place now and for future generations, within a unique environmental context, to ensure we remain a special place to live, work and visit.

Our Priorities:

- Shaping our place now and for future generations
- Protecting our climate, coast, and natural world
- Caring for our facilities, neighbourhoods and open spaces in a modern and responsive way

Introduction:

We recognise that we serve a special natural environment. Having an internationally recognised National Park that covers so much of our district, alongside many other protected designations, has many advantages in terms of preserving the character and beauty of this place.

This protected nature of so much of our district also presents challenges; not least in terms of finding the right locations for new homes and infrastructure. We recognise that successful places strike the right balance between growth and conservation.

We consider the social, environmental, and economic impact of what we do and how we do it, shaping our place to deliver the homes, jobs, infrastructure, skills and investment that are needed now and in the future. We will champion the need for carbon reduction, climate adaption, and nature recovery to build our capacity and community resilience in all we do. And there remain opportunities for us to look more widely at our district and the potential it has. Our coastline and its recreation and tourism potential present an opportunity to do more, whilst also recognising the need to work with partners to provide for the coasts long-term management and protection.

Being responsible for the care and operational upkeep of our facilities, neighbourhoods and open spaces remains one of our main responsibilities, and the focus of our frontline services that are so visible to our residents and visitors on a daily basis. We are committed to implementing our new wheeled bin waste collection service, to meet the aim of recycling more.

We will continue to deliver a green and clean environment that supports vibrant high streets and village centres, and we will challenge ourselves to do things differently by reviewing what we do and how we resource our work. We will increasingly use data and technology to ensure that our approaches, processes, and use of resources modernise the way we work and do.

We are ambitious and innovative for our residents, communities and the environments we serve to continue our work for a distinctive, prosperous and thriving place.

Priority Shaping our place now and for future generations

We will:

- Update our strategic planning framework to manage change in the future, including an updated local plan that responds to the Freeport proposition and delivers the homes and infrastructure our district needs.
- Ensure that development considers the social, environmental, and economic factors to provide sustainable outcomes that address the current and future needs of our communities.
- Review our planning processes to ensure they provide greater certainty for customers and deliver timely and effective decision making that makes the best use of resources.
- Encourage Hampshire County Council to provide necessary transport infrastructure including upgrades to the A326, in a way which delivers economic prosperity, connectivity and considers the enhancement of biodiversity and sustainable access from the National Park to the coast.
- Continue to explore the opportunities for alternative recreational offers, such as a new country park or at our coastline, to help alleviate recreational pressure on the National Park.

Measured by:

- Percentage of planning applications determined in time.
- Percentage successful planning application appeals.
- Number of homes delivered against national and local requirements.
- Levels of developer contribution and Community Infrastructure Levy secured (£) and number of projects financed.
- Number of events and cultural activities supported by New Forest District Council.

Delivery supported through:

- New Forest Local Plan
- New Forest National Park Partnership Plan
- New Forest Place Strategy

Priority Protecting our climate, coast, and natural world

We will:

- Build greater climate resilience through preparedness activity developed in our climate and nature emergency action plan and seek out opportunities to provide for carbon reduction, climate adaption, and nature recovery.
- Further develop our strategic thinking on fleet management and carbon reduction across our corporate property estate.
- Work with partners such as the Environment Agency to deliver Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management (FCERM) Strategies which will set action plans for protecting our coastline.

Measured by:

- Annual performance against Climate and Nature Emergency Action Plan.
- Overall emissions from council activity (Kg of CO₂).
- Emissions from the council's vehicle fleet.
- Percentage of household waste sent for recycling.
- Number & Percentage of ultra-low/electric taxi vehicles licensed.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with our partners at the National Park and other key stakeholders to support the protection and enhancement of natural landscapes, habitats and biodiversity to ensure the future sustainability of the Forest. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of air quality monitoring points exceeding Nitrogen Dioxide (NO2) legal limit.
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Delivery supported through:

- New Forest Local Plan
- New Forest National Park Partnership Plan
- New Forest Place Strategy / Economic Strategy
- Climate and Sustainability Supplementary Planning Document
- Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management (FCERM) Strategies

Priority Caring for our facilities, neighbourhoods and open spaces in a modern and responsive way

We will:

- Introduce our district wide wheeled bin collection service and further implement our waste strategy to increase recycling rates and reduce the amount of residual waste.
- Deliver a new operational depot at Hardley and consider opportunities to enhance our other depot sites to facilitate carbon reduction across our operations.
- Keep our ways of working and the services and facilities we provide under review, focussing on best practice and place-based outcomes to deliver in a modern and responsive way.
- Work with our key stakeholders and partners to develop policies, strategies and approaches that enable us to robustly tackle issues that affect the quality of place such as fly tipping and environmental crime.
- Develop a district wide parking strategy that looks to support new technologies, respond to the climate agenda, identify development opportunities and potentially generate more sustainable income levels to support the council’s wider aspirations and service delivery.

Measured by:

- Amount of non-recycled waste produced by households.
- Number of households using our chargeable garden waste service.
- Number of incidents of fly tipping and environmental crime and number of successful actions taken.
- Percentage customer satisfaction with the appearance of their local area.

Delivery supported through:

- Hampshire Joint Municipal Waste Strategy
- New Forest Waste Strategy 2022-2027
- Environmental Enforcement policy
- Parking Strategy



PROSPERITY

Promoting a strong local economy that delivers its aspirations through effective partnerships, attracting investment, and increasing skills and employment opportunities

Our Priorities:

- Maximising the benefits of economic growth and investment
- Supporting our high-quality business base and economic centres to thrive and grow
- Championing skills and access to job opportunities

Introduction:

An important part of our plan over the next four years is to support our high-quality business base and economic centres to thrive and grow, to realise the growth and investment opportunity which is afforded to us by our Freeport status in an inclusive way, and to ensure that our residents have the tools and skills to access the jobs which become available.

Data tells us that demographics and trends are changing, we have an older than average population, that is aging as a cohort, and this has a notable impact upon our overall economic performance as a district. We also acknowledge the indivisible link between access to a place to live and employment as part of a joined-up approach to helping make the New Forest as prosperous a place as it can be.

For the young and those of working age we want to ensure that the New Forest is a place of employment opportunity. Our ambition, by attracting economic growth and investment, is to create a more prosperous future for our residents and businesses that will make a positive difference to people's lives, and to ensure growth can be genuinely inclusive. We cannot do this by ourselves. We need our existing resident and business communities to tell us what greater prosperity looks like to them. Then, to continue to deliver outcomes we will need to place partnership working with the public, private and third sector across the region and beyond at the heart of growing prosperity across the New Forest.

The Solent Freeport is a key part of that, bringing a once in a generation opportunity to cement the Solent's place as a trading hub of global importance, and the New Forest area has a big role to play. Development sites within the New Forest will contribute to some 40% of jobs to be created by the Freeport and more than 70% of developable land. There are expected to be job opportunities in renewables, shipping and wider marine sectors which are at the heart of the Freeport's aspirations. By positively promoting the Freeport we hope to encourage people to gain the skills they need to access these emerging job opportunities. It will also require us to prepare now, so that our future labour force is well placed to provide the skills that our businesses want.

This will mean working with regional partners to encourage our schools and further education establishments to ensure that teaching plans for future skills and employment need.

While planning for the future, we already have a very important Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) sector based around our world class tourism offer and our rural economy. Supporting those smaller businesses to flourish is an equally important part of our plan. Our natural environment also presents opportunities to develop green skills, as well as being a key proponent of our tourism offer.

Much prosperity in the New Forest is linked to our town and village centres, which have always evolved over time and will continue to do so. This may present opportunities to rethink the offer of some of these centres to be more self-sustaining, viable and vibrant, particularly in parts of the district that have not been able to keep pace with changing trends, shopping behaviours, or the economic climate. We will put plans and strategies in place that ensure that this is an area of focus for us.

Priority	Maximising the benefits of economic growth and investment
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We will:

- Promote the Freeport aspiration to further develop the Solent as a globally recognised hub for trade and undertake an enabling role for investment in our Freeport tax sites.
- Ensure that investment in our district enhances rather than diminishes our special natural environment and that the benefits are locally evident and felt across all parts of our district.
- Work with the public, private and third sector across the region and beyond to deliver inclusive growth and investment that drives prosperity across the New Forest.

Measured by:

- Number of jobs created within the district.
- Hectares of industrial/employment land developed.
- Level (£) of retained business rates.

Delivery supported through:

- Solent Freeport proposition
- New Forest District Local Plan
- New Forest Place Strategy / Economic Strategy

Priority	Supporting our high-quality business base and economic centres to thrive and grow
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We will:

- Work with local people and stakeholders to develop visions and proposals for their high streets and town centres and consider where targeted regeneration approaches may be necessary.
- Establish partnerships to support our local areas to bring in new investment including grant funding.
- Support our SME base to thrive, working with the New Forest Enterprise Centre, focusing across the tourism sector and the rural economy.

Measured by:

- Levels of investment or funding secured to improve the performance of our economic centres (£).
- The number of projects delivered in our high streets and town centres.
- Increases in the levels of footfall in our town centre high streets.
- Rate of business start-ups and SME survival rates.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore the opportunities for our Arts and Culture offer and community events to help boost the vibrancy of our high streets and town centres. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceptions of our high streets and town centres.
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<p>Delivery supported through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund Programme ➤ New Forest Place Strategy ➤ Town Centre Partnerships

Priority	Championing skills and access to job opportunities
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<p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake skills assessment and mapping to inform the development of an employment and skills strategy. • Work with partners to best support our residents to access employment opportunities regardless of the barriers they face. • Encourage employment and skills training to address emerging opportunities and local need aligned to the Solent Freeport proposals, the green agenda, as well as established New Forest sectors such as marine, tourism and the rural economy. 	<p>Measured by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Levels of employment growth (Employment / Unemployment rate) • Number of funded hours of skills programmes and support provided. • Employment rate percentage of working age adults (aged 16-64).
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<p>Delivery supported through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Employment and skills strategy

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FUTURE NEW FOREST

Investing in our people and services to meet customers’ needs, protecting the council’s financial position, and embedding sustainability through our Future New Forest transformation programme

Introduction:

Underpinning the delivery of our priorities is the council’s transformation programme; Future New Forest. This ambitious programme will influence how we operate, enable us to support our strategic objectives and to make choices for the future. The programme will focus efforts on our customers and easy to use digital-first delivery of services, efficient working practices and processes, our people and capabilities, the use of our assets and accommodation and ensuring a sustainable financial position. The Council has developed equality objectives that are embedded in this plan and will maintain an overarching commitment to environmental sustainability in all that we do.

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Putting our customers at the heart, we will:	Being an employer of choice, we will:	Being financially responsible, we will:	Designing modern and innovative services, we will
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver customer and digital strategies that meet our customers’ needs. • Develop and provide services using data and insight to ensure that we understand our customers and meet the needs of our diverse communities. • Implement a customer relationship management system that keeps customers informed on progress and instils confidence in service delivery. • Increase the number of services available online, whilst focusing face to face and telephone contact for those who need it most. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver a people strategy that outlines how we attract, retain, and grow talent. • Encourage diversity and champion equality within our workplace, developing and supporting an inclusive working environment where all staff are respected with zero tolerance of bullying and harassment. • Invest in skills development, training, and career progressions opportunities to ensure a skilled and resilient workforce and leadership team for the future. • Commit to paying at least the national living wage to our staff. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain a balanced budget and deliver value for money to our residents through service reviews, procurement and contract management, and transformation efficiencies. • Maintain an up-to-date medium term financial plan and financial strategy to address the council’s financial challenges beyond the short-term • Be commercially focused in our approach to investment strategies and income opportunities guided by strategic priorities. • Maximise the use of our assets and accommodation to support efficient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standardise and apply common design patterns and platforms across the council to release capacity and deliver efficiency benefits. • Proactively use data and insight to inform decision-making and report performance through a robust performance management framework and culture. • Maximise the use of new technology, automate manual processes and keep our software up to date with technology releases. • Maintain robust and resilient ICT infrastructure to protect the integrity of data and our digital systems

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote employee wellbeing and prioritise work-life balance by adopting flexible and family-friendly working practices 	and effective delivery of our future service provision.	
Measured by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Percentage resident satisfaction in perception measures. Percentage customer satisfaction in perception measures. Number and percentage of services available digitally. 	Measured by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Percentage of vacancies filled first time. Percentage staff turnover. Average number of days sickness absence per employee. Number of training days per employee. Amount of training spend per employee. Number of council apprenticeships. 	Measured by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Percentage variance to Council budget +/- (General fund budget variations). Percentage variance to Housing Revenue budget +/- (HRA budget variations). Percentage of Council Tax collected. 	Measured by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Benefit realisation through ICT investment. Percentage of ICT incidents resolved within SLA. Number of projects delivered on time and to budget. Percentage unscheduled downtime.
Delivery supported through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Customer Strategy 	Delivery supported through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> People Strategy Pay Policy 	Delivery supported through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Medium Term Financial Plan Transformation Strategy Asset & Accommodation Strategy Procurement Strategy 	Delivery supported through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digital Strategy ICT Security and Information Governance Policy

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RESOURCES AND TRANSFORMATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL – 16 NOVEMBER 2023

COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME 2024/25, HOUSING BENEFIT INCOME DISREGARD AND NATIONAL NON-DOMESTIC RATE RELIEF POLICY REVIEW

1. RECOMMENDATION

- 1.1 That the Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel recommends to Cabinet the following:
- a) to increase the standard earnings disregard and remove the additional earnings disregard, as detailed in Section 7, from 1 April 2024
 - b) that a Task and Finish Group review a Banded scheme during 2024.
 - c) that the full disregard of war pension income in the assessment of Housing Benefit, as detailed in Section 9, be approved
 - d) that the updated National Non-Domestic Rate Relief policy as detailed in Section 10, be approved

2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The purpose of this report is to consider the recommendations of the Council Tax Reduction Task and Finish Group on the Council Tax Reduction scheme, the disregard of war pension income in the assessment of Housing Benefit, and a review of our National Non-Domestic rate relief policy.

3 COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME

- 3.1 Members will recall that local authorities are responsible for setting up their own local Council Tax Reduction Scheme to support those of working age on low income with paying their council tax. The Government stipulated that there must be no change to the level of support that pensioners receive and there are no plans to localise the scheme for this group. There are no plans to include Council Tax Reduction within Universal Credit.
- 3.2 The Council must formally approve the Council Tax Reduction Scheme no later than 11 March in any year, to take effect from 1 April.
- 3.3 The Council Tax Reduction Scheme fulfils the prescribed requirements for localised schemes.
- 3.4 There are currently 7,939 claimants receiving Council Tax Reduction. Of these 4,236 are working age and 3,703 are of pensionable age. See Appendix 1 for caseload trend.
- 3.5 The current Council Tax Reduction Scheme costs approximately £9.5 million, with this cost being shared between all precepting authorities. The cost is split between:
- | | |
|-------------|------------|
| Working Age | £4,805,991 |
| Pensioner | £4,734,836 |
- 3.6 The amount of Council Tax Reduction awarded affects the tax base of each organisation and is not identified within the overall formula grant allocation.

4. REVIEW PROCESS

- 4.1 The Task & Finish Group met to review the current scheme and proposed changes effective from 1 April 2024.
- 4.2 Due to the timing of the District Council election and the lead time required to undertake the necessary detailed analysis and impact assessments, it has not been possible to undertake a full review of the scheme, including consideration of a banded scheme. It is recommended by the Group to consider this in 2024.
- 4.3 The recommendations of the Task & Finish Group are to be considered by the Resources and Transformation Overview Scrutiny Panel, the Cabinet and full Council in December 2024.

5. THE CURRENT LOCAL COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME

- 5.1 The council's Council Tax Reduction Scheme protects vulnerable residents so that some of the changes to the scheme do not apply to them, see 5.2 and 5.3 as examples. A person is vulnerable if they (or a partner) are in receipt of Disability Living Allowance, Personal Independence Payments or Severe Disablement Allowance.
- 5.2 The council's Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2023/24 requires all working age claimants (except vulnerable households) to pay a minimum of 10% council tax.
- 5.3 The council's Council Tax Reduction Scheme also includes:
- Council Tax Reductions are capped at band D (so that claimants living in higher banded properties receive support based on band D). There is no band cap for vulnerable households.
 - A savings limit of £6,000 (£16,000 for vulnerable households), so that claimants with more than £6,000 in savings are not entitled to any reduction.
 - The council's Council Tax Reduction Scheme incentivises work by disregarding £25.00 a week of earnings. For comparison purposes, the government disregards in Housing Benefit are £25.00 for a lone parent, £20.00 for a disabled claimant, £10.00 for a couple and £5.00 for a single claimant.

6. MATTERS CONSIDERED BY TASK & FINISH GROUP

- 6.1 Collecting council tax from those on low income is difficult, with significantly more work for officers. Administration has also increased, notably in working with those affected. In 2023/24 council tax bills increased by an average of 5%, meaning council taxpayers having to pay more. This is likely to continue in the forthcoming years.
- 6.2 The Council Tax in-year collection rate for those in receipt of Council Tax Reduction, who are not a pensioner or vulnerable, has reduced from 74.63% to 74.21% and overall in year collection rate for those in receipt of Council Tax Reduction increased from 85.59% to 87.00%.

6.3 Many of the claimants have also been affected by the increase in the cost of living, in particular fuel and food inflation which adversely affects low-income households, although there has been some government support provided. This includes the Council Tax Support Fund, which reduces those receiving Council Tax Support on 1 April 2023 with an outstanding council tax liability by up to £25.00, and a Discretionary Fund, where an additional £10.00 being awarded as well as supporting all new claims for Council Tax Reduction in 2023/24 with a £25.00 reduction in their council tax liability.

7. DISCUSSION ON COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME FOR 2024/25

7.1 The group considered reviewing various aspects of the current scheme. This included:

- a) the 10% minimum contribution
- b) the Band D cap
- c) the capital limit of £6,000

7.2 The Group discussed these aspects and agreed to maintain these and not to propose any changes.

7.3 The Group also discussed a Banded scheme and recommended a fundamental review of this be undertaken in 2024 when sufficient time could be devoted to this.

7.4 The Group discussed one proposed change, summarised as follows:

Proposed change	No. of claims affected	Overall financial impact
To remove the Additional Earnings Disregard and increase the Standard Earnings Disregard	Circa 1,400	Minimal

7.5 The Group discussed the reasons and impact of the proposed change.

7.6 Currently, our scheme disregards £25.00 per week from all earnings, irrespective of the number of hours worked, this is known as the standard earnings disregard. There is an additional £17.10 per week disregarded in specified circumstances, where:

- Lone parent working more than 16 hours a week
- Single person working more than 30 hours a week
- Couple where one is working at least 30 hours a week
- The person working receives a disability benefit and works more than 16 hours a week

7.7 Currently, the council is notified electronically from the Department for Work and Pensions of claimants Universal Credit awards. This includes details on earnings of both the claimant and partner, both when making a new claim and when assessing ongoing entitlement. This information is used to work out entitlement to Council Tax Reduction. Notifications are received every time there is a change to a claimant's or partners earnings, with many households having changes every month as their hours of work varied. Universal Credit Notifications do not include

details about the number of hours worked and this information is needed to ascertain the level of earnings disregard to apply.

- 7.8 To ensure the correct level of disregard is applied, manual intervention is required by officers to review and update every notification received. This means having to contact claimants by either phone, email or letter, to ascertain their number of hours worked, this often results in multiple attempts to contact claimants and retrospective changes to awards, meaning reissuing of decision notices and recalculation and sending of council tax bills. This increased administration, delays processing times and limits the amount of automation that could be done to thousands of notifications received each year.
- 7.9 Our aim is to fully maximise the automation to streamline processes and simplify administration so that the numbers of hours worked is not relevant or required when making decisions on entitlement. By removing the Additional Earnings Disregard (AED) of £17.10 per week and increasing the weekly Standard Earnings Disregard, this would significantly simplify the scheme for the Council and claimants and mitigate the impact. It would also streamline working practices and simplify administration, both for the Council and for claimants, who would not need to continually provide details of the number of hours worked. Increasing automation of earnings notifications would enable more efficient use of resources, reduce costs, and have a bearing on staffing levels.
- 7.10 Members had previously requested further information, including analysis of the impact of this change if it were to be cost neutral, i.e., the change would not result in an increase or decrease in the overall amount of support given from the scheme.
- 7.11 Members noted in the impact assessment regarding the effect on support for working age people. It was noted that removing the AED but increasing the weekly standard earnings disregard by £10.00 would achieve a broadly cost neutral outcome, incurring a small increase in overall costs of circa £8,000, but ensuring a rounded disregard amount (the exact amount to ensure cost neutral would be £9.26). It is noted that the cost would be offset by a reduction in administration costs as detailed in 7.8.
- 7.12 The impact of this change is:
- a) a reduction in support by up to £74.04 per annum for 701 claimants, though potentially this would be mitigated in part, or in full in some cases, by annual upratings.
 - b) an increase in support by up to £104.57 per annum to 733 claimants who would be better off with this change as more of their earnings would be disregarded. This would provide additional financial support to those low-income households working less than 16 hours per week and it would incentivise work.
- 7.13 This change will affect all claims from 1 April 2024.
- 7.14 The Group were made aware of the Exceptional Hardship Payment scheme which is available to support any claimant in exceptional financial hardship with paying their Council Tax due to a shortfall between their Council Tax Reduction and the amount

of Council Tax to pay. Should any reduction in the level of support cause hardship, claimants can apply for Exceptional Hardship Payments.

8. CONSULTATION

- 8.1 The Council has a duty to consult on any changes to the scheme. The Council undertook a consultation exercise over a 6-week period, from 30 August 2023 to 11 October 2023, advertising on the council's website, social media, residents email, as well as contacting Hampshire County Council and Citizens Advice New Forest.
- 8.2 The Council only received 16 responses, with a range of responses with no clear view. Due to the minimal response received it is not possible to determine any conclusions.
- 8.3 After considering the consultation responses, the Group recommend making the proposed change to the Council Tax Reduction scheme from 1 April 2024.

9. HOUSING BENEFIT DISREGARD OF WAR PENSION INCOME

- 9.1 The Housing Benefit Regulations 2006 provide a £10.00 per week disregard from specified war pension income in the assessment of entitlement to Housing Benefit, with local authorities having discretion to disregard up to 100% of this income.
- 9.2 The incomes in scope are:
- Constant Attendance Allowance
 - Comforts Allowance (higher rate)
 - Comforts Allowance (lower rate)
 - Mobility Supplement
 - War Disability Pension – Unemployability Supplement
 - War Disability Pension
 - War Pensions Additions
- 9.3 The Council currently uses its discretion to disregard 100% of war pension income and there are currently 18 Housing Benefit claims receiving this disregard.
- 9.4 The Group recommend no change so that our long term commitment to disregard 100% of war pension income continues to support ex-service personnel.

10. NATIONAL NON-DOMESTIC RATE RELIEF POLICY REVIEW

- 10.1 The Group reviewed the current National Non-Domestic Rate Relief policy that provides rate relief for businesses paying business rates, see Appendix 2. Rate Relief can be mandatory, discretionary or both, and is granted in accordance with the Local Government Finance Act 1988 and 2012, and the Localism Act 2011.
- 10.2 The Group support the updated policy attached as Appendix 2 and recommend its approval and adoption with immediate effect.

11. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 The financial implications of the proposed changes were discussed.

11.2 The proposed change will have a minimal impact on the overall cost of the Council Tax Reduction scheme, increasing total costs by circa £8,000.

11.3 To continue to apply a 100% disregard of war pension income in the assessment of Housing Benefit entitlement costs £36,550 per annum.

12. CRIME & DISORDER IMPLICATIONS / ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS / DATA PROTECTION IMPLICATIONS

12.1 Data held to administer Council Tax Reduction and Housing Benefit are subject to our data retention schedule.

13. EQUALITY & DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

13.1 Our Council Tax Reduction scheme continues to support those on a low income and protects vulnerable households and proactive steps are taken to promote and maximise take-up. The continuation of disregarding 100% of war pension income supports those who have served in the armed forces.

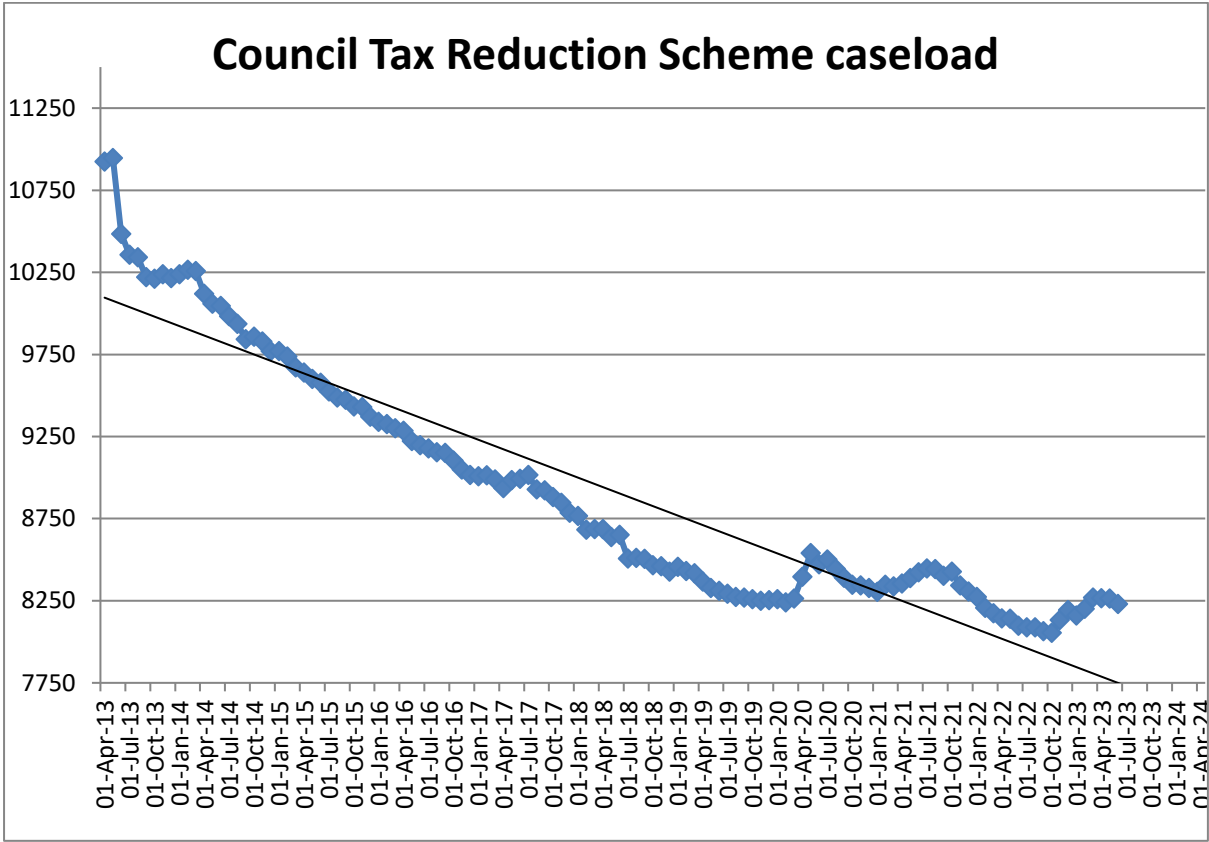
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Background Papers:

Minutes of Task & Finish Group

Council Tax Reduction Caseload



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New Forest District Council

Revenues and Benefits Service Rate Relief Policy

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This policy sets out the Council's approach to supporting local businesses under its business rate relief schemes.
- 1.2 The Council recognises the importance of supporting local businesses and organisations to promote the provision of economic growth and local facilities. Councils have the power to grant discretionary rate relief to organisations that meet certain criteria, and this policy applies to applications for rate relief for National Non-Domestic Rates (Business Rates). Rate Relief can be mandatory, discretionary or both, and is granted in accordance with the Local Government Finance Act 1988 and 2012, and the Localism Act 2011.
- 1.3 This policy specifies the factors that will be considered when deciding whether to award a relief. All applications will be decided on its merits, and we will treat all customers fairly and equally.

2. Policy Aims

- 2.1 Public funds are limited and a proportion of the costs of the rate relief granted is borne by local council tax payers. In making decisions, the Council must be satisfied that awarding a rate relief will benefit the community.
- 2.2 The Council will treat all applicants equally, will consider all applications on their individual merits fairly and consistently, and will seek through administering this policy to meet corporate objectives and support local businesses and organisations.
- 2.3 The overall interests of Council Tax payers is safeguarded by ensuring that funds are allocated and used in the most effective and economic way.

3. Rural Rate Relief

Mandatory Rate Relief

- 3.1 Certain properties can be awarded rate relief if it is located in a rural area, which is defined as a rural area with a population below 3,000.
- 3.2 50% rate relief shall be awarded where the ratepayer occupies:
 - the only general store or post office within a rural settlement and the rateable value is less than £8,500.
 - the only pub or petrol station within the rural area with a rateable value of £12,500 or less.

Discretionary Rate Relief

- 3.3 50% rate relief will be awarded in all cases where the occupier is entitled to the 50% mandatory rate relief.
- 3.4 In addition, 100% rate relief can be awarded where the ratepayer occupies a property within a rural settlement with a rateable value of less than £16,500 and where the council considers the property provides a clear benefit to the local community.

Reviews

3.5 All mandatory and discretionary rate relief awards will be reviewed every 3 years.

4. Registered Charities

Mandatory Rate Relief

4.1 80% rate relief shall be awarded where:

- (a) the ratepayer of a property is a registered charity and
- (b) the property is wholly or mainly used for charitable purposes

Reviews

4.2 All mandatory rate relief awards will be reviewed every 3 years

Discretionary Rate Relief

4.3 20% discretionary rate relief can be awarded where the ratepayer is entitled to the mandatory rate relief and where:

- where the property is occupied and used to provide a service or benefit to the local community,
- is open to all the community,
- the ratepayer is able to demonstrate they would sustain financial hardship if the rate relief was not awarded
- it is reasonable for the Council to do so, having regard to the interests of local council tax payers

The following will not be eligible for a discretionary award:

- charity shops,
- private and independent schools
- Housing Associations

Reviews

4.4 Discretionary Rate Relief awards will be subject to the following review periods:

- (a) Every 5 years where the annual value of the discretionary rate relief award is more than £1,500
- (b) Every 3 years where the annual value of the discretionary rate relief award is less than £1,500

5. Registered Community Amateur Sports Clubs

Mandatory Rate Relief

5.1 80% rate relief shall be awarded where the ratepayer is registered with HMRC as a Community Amateur Sports Club.

Discretionary Rate Relief

5.2 The council has decided not to make any discretionary awards. However, where the Community Amateur Sports Club would otherwise be entitled to small business rate relief we will award:

- 20% where the rateable value is below £12,000

Reviews

5.3 Any mandatory rate reliefs will be reviewed every 3 years.

6. Sports Clubs and Not for Profit Organisations

6.1 The council has the discretion to award discretionary rate relief of up to 100% of the business rates on properties occupied by a sports club and not-for-profit-organisations. Applications will be treated on their own merits and in consideration of the interests of local taxpayers.

6.2 To be eligible for consideration, the property must be:

- (a) Wholly or mainly used for the purposes of recreation and all or part of it is occupied for the purpose of a club, society, or other organisation not established or conducted for profit; or
- (b) occupied for the purposes of one or more institutions or other organisations, none of whom are established or conducted for profit and each of whose main objectives are charitable or are otherwise philanthropic or religious or concerned with education, social welfare, science, literature, or the fine arts.

6.3 The organisation should be able to demonstrate a financial need for rate relief. The government has provided some guidance when considering an application.

6.4 In making a decision, we will consider the following:

Access and membership

- (a) Is membership open to all sections of the community? There may be legitimate restrictions placed on membership, e.g., where the capacity of the club is limited. Organisations will not be considered if the membership rate is high and therefore excludes the general community.
- (b) Does the organisation actively encourage membership from across the community or actively target specific groups, such as young people, older age groups, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities etc. Organisations which do not encourage such membership may not be successful.
- (c) Are the facilities made available to the community, other than just members? The wider use of facilities should be encouraged and promoted.
- (d) Is the organisation affiliated to local or national organisations, e.g., local sports or arts councils, national representative bodies? i.e., are they actively involved in local/national development of their interests
- (e) How is the organisation funded?

Provision of facilities

- (a) Does the organisation provide training or education to its members, or schemes to develop skills?
- (b) Have the facilities available been provided by self-help or grant aid? An organisation that uses or has used self-help or grant aid for construction, maintenance or provision of facilities may be considered more favourably.
- (c) Does the organisation have a bar? Having a bar should not in itself be a reason for not granting relief. The Council will look at the main purpose of the organisation, for example bringing people together with similar interests. In sports clubs for example the balance between playing and non-playing members might provide a useful guide as to whether the main purpose of the club is sporting or social activities.
- (d) Does the organisation provide facilities which indirectly relieve the Council of the need to do so, or enhance and supplement those which it does provide? The Council will not refuse to grant rate relief on the grounds that an organisation is in competition with the Council itself but will look at the broader context of the needs of the community as a whole. A new need, not being provided by the Council but identified as a priority for action, might be particularly deserving of support.
- (e) Are the premises available to the wider community to use?

Reviews

6.5 Discretionary Rate Relief awards will be reviewed within the lifetime of the rating list.

7. Small Business Rate Relief

7.1 Small business rate relief is a mandatory relief and will be awarded based on the following criteria:

- (a) There is mandatory rate relief of 100% where the ratepayer occupies a property with a rateable value of £12,000 or less, or if more than one property is occupied and the additional property has a rateable value of less than £2,900 and the combined rateable value of all the properties is not more than £20,000,
- (b) Rate relief is awarded on a sliding scale where the ratepayer occupies one main non-domestic property with a rateable value of between £12,000 and £15,000, or if the ratepayer occupies more than one non-domestic property, each additional property has a rateable value of less than £2,900 and the total rateable value of all properties is less than £20,000.

7.2 Where a demand notice is issued to a ratepayer information is provided about this relief.

Reviews

7.3 All awards will be reviewed during the lifetime of the rating list

8. Hardship Rate Relief

8.1 The Council will consider applications for hardship rate relief of up to 100% of the business rates due by taking into consideration the following:

- (a) the ratepayer would sustain hardship if the authority did not do so; and

- (b) it is reasonable for the authority to do so, having regard to the interests of persons subject to its council tax.
- 8.2 The amount of any hardship rate relief award will be capped at the lower of 6 months rates liability or £3,000.
- 8.3 The intention is to support businesses in the short term, with awards usually being for a maximum period of 6 months, to allow the business to develop, recover or manage an event or decline and become financially stable. Government guidelines advise that the awarding of rate relief should only be in exceptional circumstances. The test of hardship is not necessarily confined to financial hardship; all relevant factors affecting the ability of a business to meet its liabilities will be taken into consideration. It is the ratepayer's responsibility to demonstrate hardship and to supply supporting evidence.
- 8.4 The council is open and transparent and as such, any hardship award must fulfil the test as to whether council taxpayers would consider the award to be reasonable and in their best interests.
- 8.5 Any award will be an exception and when making a decision, we will consider the following:
- (a) Whether the business provides a service to the community
 - (b) Whether the service provided is obtainable elsewhere within a reasonable distance
 - (c) Whether there is a genuine prospect of the business going out of business without an award
 - (d) The number of persons employed by the business
 - (e) Whether there is a genuine prospect of the business continuing in the long term after an award
 - (f) The latest figures available for net profit/loss, and the cost of business rates as a percentage of total business expenses and gross profit.
 - (g) If the hardship is not just the result of economic or market factors, nor due to excessive drawings or outgoings.
 - (h) What steps the ratepayer has taken to alleviate the hardship
 - (i) Details of why the business is experiencing hardship
 - (j) How long the business has been trading. An award of Hardship rate relief will not be made for the purpose of enabling a new business to become established except where the viability of the business is threatened by events that could not reasonably have been foreseen when establishing the business
 - (k) If the property is unoccupied, awards will only be made in exceptional circumstances and where there are clear benefits to council tax payers
 - (l) The ratepayers history of business success or failure
 - (m) Consideration will be given where the ratepayer has more than one trading business
- 8.6 Hardship relief will not be granted where the applicant:
- Has failed to have adequate insurance for their business or premises, resulting in the application for hardship
 - Has not maintained payment of their business rates for previous years

9. Partly unoccupied properties

9.1 Where part of a property is unoccupied for a short time the council has discretion to reduce the rates on a property by awarding rate relief in respect of the unoccupied part of the property. The council will ask the Valuation Office Agency to apportion the rateable value between the occupied and unoccupied parts of the property.

9.2 In deciding whether to award a rate relief the following factors will be considered:

- (a) The reasons for the part occupation
- (b) The expected duration of any part occupation
- (c) Previous awards to the same organisation

9.3 The rate relief can apply for a maximum of 6 months for industrial properties and a maximum of 3 months for non-industrial properties.

10. Policies and procedures

10.1 For any award of discretionary rate relief, as set out in sections 4, 5, 6 and 8 applicants must ensure that:

- There are relevant policies such as child protection, safeguarding, health and safety, codes of practice
- They must adhere to the Equality Act 2010 and Disability Discrimination Act to legally protect people from discrimination in the workplace and in the wider society.
- All of the organisations employed staff must be paid the current national living wage as a minimum

10.2 Where an application is received from an organisation that is the subject of an investigation by a relevant regulator, such as the Charity Commission, we will make a decision once the outcome of the investigation is decided.

11. Applications

11.1 An application must be made in the format prescribed by the council and include any supporting evidence the council considers necessary. This could include audited accounts and recent bank statements.

11.2 Where requested information and evidence is not supplied the Council will not make an award.

12. Awards

12.1 Any reliefs awarded will be applied directly to the business rates account.

12.2 Reliefs will cease and any overpaid rate relief will be recovered where:

- (a) The applicant ceases to be liable for business rates,
- (b) The property for which relief is granted becomes empty,
- (c) The use of the property changes
- (d) The aims, or objectives of the organisation changes or it ceases from activities which the Council considers to meet the above eligibility criteria
- (e) The organisation ceases trading

- (f) There is a change in circumstances, for example a change in the rateable value
 - (g) The applicant no longer meets the eligibility criteria for an award, for example they lose their CASC status
- 12.3 Awards will be considered from the date the application is received. In exceptional circumstances consideration may be given to awarding rate relief for a retrospective period where the ratepayer can demonstrate good cause for not submitting the application earlier, subject to the following constraints relating to discretionary awards:
- (a) If the application is received by 30 September, the award can be backdated to 1 April of the previous financial year
 - (b) If the application is received after 30 September, the award can only be backdated to 1 April of the current financial year

13. Decision Making

- 13.1 Decisions will be made by the Business Rate team, in conjunction with the Revenues Manager, in accordance with the eligibility criteria.

14 Notification

- 14.1 The Council will notify ratepayers within one month of making their application and providing all the supporting information.
- 14.2 Where an award is made notification will be sent to confirm the amount and duration of the award and the ratepayers revised liability. The ratepayer will be required to notify the council of any changes in their circumstances that could affect the award.

15. Review of decisions

- 15.1 The Council will operate an internal review process and will accept an applicant's request for an appeal of its decision.
- 15.2 All such requests must be made in writing or by email to the Council within one month of the Council's decision and should state the reasons why the applicant is aggrieved with the decision of the Council. New information may be submitted at this stage to support the applicant's appeal.
- 15.3 The application will be reconsidered by Service Manager – Revenue, Benefits and Customer Services, as soon as practicable and the applicant informed in writing or by email of the decision. This decision is final and there are no further grounds to challenge a decision internally, however an applicant may apply for a Judicial Review of a decision.
- 15.4 Ratepayers should continue to pay any amounts due whilst the application is awaiting a decision, unless the Council has agreed with the ratepayer that payments are suspended.
- 15.5 Where an application is refused, further applications will not be considered within 12 months unless:
- the use of the property changes

- the objectives of the organisation changes, or
- there are other material changes that may affect the Council's decision

16. Subsidy control

- 16.1 Discretionary Business Rates relief shall not be awarded in any circumstances where it appears that an award will result in the ratepayer receiving Subsidy that is above the current de minimus level. For further information please visit <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/subsidy-control-regime>

17. Financial implications

- 17.1 The implications of awarding a Discretionary Rate Relief are that the cost to the Council is 40% of the award.

18. Review

- 18.1 The council will review this policy every 5 years or earlier if legislation changes.

RESOURCES AND TRANSFORMATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL - 16 NOVEMBER 2023

FINANCIAL STRATEGY TASK AND FINISH GROUP 2023 – OUTCOME REPORT

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.1 That the Overview and Scrutiny Panel note the contents of the report and endorse the Group conclusions set out in paragraph 7.1 below.

2. PURPOSE

- 2.1 This report sets out the work of the Financial Strategy Task and Finish Group and presents a set of conclusions. The Group met 4 times over September and October 2023.

3. TERMS OF REFERENCE AND MEMBERSHIP

- 3.1 The **Terms of Reference** for the Financial Strategy Task and Finish Group 2023 were:
- To provide detailed scrutiny on the budget assumptions made within the latest Medium Term Financial Plan.
 - To consider an alternative format for high-level budget adoption.
 - To overview the reserve balances held by the Council, in light of the planned reduction here, and potential for borrowing moving forward.
- 3.2 **Membership of Group:**
- Cllr Keith Craze (Chairman)
 - Kate Crisell
 - Cllr Jack Davies
 - Cllr Philip Dowd
 - Cllr Joe Reilly
 - Cllr Steve Rippon-Swaine
 - Cllr John Sleep

4. SESSION 1: MTFP OVERVIEW AND ASSUMPTIONS

- 4.1 The Group received an overview of the Council's financial position, including Medium Term Financial Plan and Annual Budget, for both the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account. The Group were reminded that in setting the MTFP and Annual Budget, members had a responsibility to consider the longer-term effect of decisions taken.
- 4.2 The first part of the session covered the General Fund and included:
- The MTFP Cycle / Overviews and Assumptions
 - Cumulative Budget Deficit to 2027/28
 - Funding Summary
 - Tax base Growth and Council Tax increase assumptions to 2027/28

4.3 The Group noted a number of unquantified budget impacts at present, which included:

- Business rate changes
- Fair funding review
- Extended Producer Responsibility
- Capital programme financing
- New Burden Funding
- New Homes Bonus

4.4 Members then received a wide range of information on budget pressures, including pay and price growth, homelessness costs, waste investment, and the effects of cost of living pressures. To conclude the General Fund part of the session, members were guided through the options that had been identified to close the forecast budget deficit, and the potential these options had to create a degree of short-term headroom in the budget, should items come forward early, for investment in corporate plan priorities, or in tackling other budget pressures, including the financing of a large Capital Programme.

4.5 The second part of the session focused on the Housing Revenue Account and members were advised of the relative security of income. Assumptions had been made on income growth over the MTFP period, but it was unknown how Central Government policy may affect allowable rent increases over the period. It was noted that the Government had stepped in with a revised maximum threshold for 2023/24.

4.6 Members were advised that the Council had been meeting its principal loan repayment obligations since re-payments commenced in 2017 but noted that due to pressures within expenditure budgets for 2023/24, the original budget had assumed a degree of re-financing for the principal element due for repayment in March 2024.

4.7 Further unquantified impacts and mitigations were identified that had the potential to worsen or improve the forecast budget deficit within the HRA to 2027/28. It was of particular note that the Greener Housing Strategy had the potential to add significant expenditure to the Capital Programme over the coming years.

5 SESSION 2: ALTERNATIVE BUDGET FORMAT

5.1 The Group was asked to review alternative formats for high level budget reporting for the General Fund and Housing Revenue Accounts.

5.2 Members were reminded that at NFDC, the current budget layout shown in committee reports was aligned to portfolios. Disadvantages to this were that if portfolios were reorganised, this necessitated a change in budget presentation and a restatement of the previous year's financial statements. This created extra work for the external auditor, which in turn meant higher audit fees.

5.3 The current approach also presented a lack of transparency in the way corporate resources were shown as a collective cost, as corporate costs were distributed across all services.

5.4 The Group were shown examples from other authorities and the way their budgets were presented, which varied widely. Some appeared to present their finances under corporate plan headings, whilst others showed their costs to chief officer

responsibilities, and others used portfolios like NFDC. It was commented that some corporate plan headings were wide ranging, could be ambiguous and not very informative to the public.

- 5.5 It was acknowledged that there was a balance to be struck between internal control and providing an appropriate and digestible level of information for elected members and the public.

6 SESSION 3: RESERVE BALANCES

- 6.1 The Group received a detailed overview of reserve balances held by the Council for the General Fund and HRA, and potential for borrowing moving forward. It also received a summary of projected Cash and Internal borrowing.
- 6.2 The Group were reminded of the requirement under Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003 to ensure local authorities had adequate reserves.
- 6.3 The Group noted the Council's reserves held for various purposes, including supporting committed projects, statutory requirements, Government grants, and the required budget reserves to support both the General Fund and HRA. The General Fund Reserve of £3M supported an overall spend of £75M. There was also a £2.699m budget equalisation reserve to support the delivery of the MTFP.
- 6.4 It was explained to the Group that balances held in reserves had been utilised to provide the required financing for the Capital Programme, through internal borrowing. Internal borrowing in this way reduced the cost of external finance (interest charges) and so was a sound practice aligning to the Council's Treasury Management Strategy. It was further explained that where internal borrowing was in use, the revenue budget then re-paid the amount borrowed over the life of the asset it had been used to finance. The example of a refuse vehicle costing £140,000, with a 7 year life was used, whereby the General Fund then repaid £20,000 per annum over 7 years to replenish the cash back into reserves. It was therefore noted that internal borrowing still put pressure on the revenue fund budget, albeit at no cost above the principal amount 'borrowed'.
- 6.5 Reserve balances were always being put to use, either to support services through internal borrowing, or invested in line with the adopted Treasury Management Strategy. The Group noted that the Audit Committee received quarterly Treasury Management reports. It was confirmed that as a result of the reserve balances held over time, the Council had now fully invested the initial £30M aligned to the Asset Investment Strategy, all funded with internal cash balances.
- 6.6 Other Capital schemes such as Hardley Depot (£7.5m) were to be funded with a blend of capital receipt and capital programme reserves. It was also noted that significant expenditure was forecast over the next 2-4 years as the Council looked to roll-out the new Waste Strategy. This would lead to a significant reduction in reserve balances over the period. It was acknowledged that reserves could of course be only used once.
- 6.7 Reference was made to rising CIL and Developer Contributions monies held and the need to prioritise larger strategic infrastructure schemes which had greatest impact. It was commented that it was not therefore surprising to see rising reserve balances in this area. Examples of major schemes included high value coastal works, where it was important to obtain strategic partner funding, and the Council always maximised this wherever it could.

- 6.8 The Group were reminded of the October 2023 Cabinet report where it was agreed to establish a Task and Finish Group to review £1m in proposed CIL allocations to local infrastructure projects so that they may directly advise the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy.
- 6.9 To date, no external borrowing had been done, and this would only be done when cash reserves were at the minimum requirement. It was noted that at least £10m was required to retain the Authority's Professional Investor Status. This was important to maintain as certain investment products and services were only available to organisations holding this status level.
- 6.10 The Group noted the reserves held for HRA spending and investment. A £1m reserve was held on a £20m budget. HRA Capital Programme reserves had reduced following significant housing delivery over the last 3-4 years. Reference was made to recent increases in borrowing rates from a history ranging from 0.5% in the last few years to current rates in excess of 5%.
- 6.11 Like with General Fund schemes, the Council was very proactive in obtaining funding from Homes England to support the Council's housing strategy delivery, or from DLUHC to support Greener Housing in association with the HRA.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND GROUP FEEDBACK

- 7.1 The Group felt that the Council was in a good position despite the various financial pressures that the Authority faced. It was aware of the future options for the use of reserves and the limits under which they could be employed to support the Council's service provision. The following is a list of concluding points agreed by the Group:
- (a) That the budget assumptions in the main appeared sound, with an MTFP for both the General Fund and HRA prepared on the basis of the most likely scenario over the next 4 years.
 - (b) That close monitoring of the Homelessness budget continue, being mindful of the MTFP expectation of the removal over the next 3 years of the additional £1m put into the 2023/24 budget.
 - (c) That members were content with the current budget format, but that officers could, where appropriate, re-name certain key service lines to make their descriptions clearer, and add weblinks to further information in some areas when e-budget books were published online.
 - (d) That the approach to the use of current reserves for investment and to support Council services as set out above, be endorsed, including operational use of earmarked reserves down to statutory limits and in line with government guidance and as recommended by the Section 151 Officer.
 - (e) In light of significant interest rates at the current time, that due consideration is given to the size of the capital programme, given the likely need for external loan finance to fund the programme in the near term.
 - (f) The Group appreciated working to the terms of reference for this year's task, but were keen to see a return to a more Portfolio - themed approach in next year's Task & Finish process.

Further Information:

Financial Strategy Task and Finish
Group

Enquiries:

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Democratic Services Officer
Andy.Rogers@NFDC.gov.uk

Background Papers:

Financial Strategy Task and Finish
Group working papers
Published documents

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RESOURCES AND TRANSFORMATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

WORK PROGRAMME 2023/2024

ITEM	OBJECTIVE	METHOD	LEAD OFFICER
18 JANUARY 2024			
Asset Maintenance and Replacement Programme	To receive details of the proposed programme and pass any comments to Cabinet.	Written Report	Alan Bethune
Capital Strategy	To receive details of the proposed strategy and pass any comments to Cabinet.	Written Report	Alan Bethune
ICT Investment Vs Benefits Realisation / Strategy Delivery Update	To receive a KPI assessment of ICT Investment Vs Benefits Realisation and an update on the delivery of the ICT Strategy	Written Report	Rich Bird / Kim Gray
Transformation Programme Update	To receive an update on progress with the Transformation programme.	Presentation	Rebecca Drummond
28 MARCH 2024			
Council Tax Reduction Task & Finish Group Arrangements for 2024	To agree arrangements for the Council Tax Reduction T&F meetings for 2024	Discussion	Ryan Stevens
Staff Efficiency Ideas	To receive the annual summary of ideas put forward by staff	Written Report	Heleana Aylett
Platinum Jubilee Business Park. Business Park. Project close	To receive an update on the current position with Platinum Jubilee Business Park.	Written Report	Andrew Mills

ITEM	OBJECTIVE	METHOD	LEAD OFFICER
Corporate Plan 2024 -28	To consider the final Corporate Plan draft after the consultation exercise.	Written Report	Saqib Yasin / Rebecca Drummond
Transformation programme update	To receive an update	Written Report	Rebecca Drummond
Customer Strategy	To consider a draft Customer Strategy	Written Report	Ryan Stevens
27 JUNE 2024			
Annual Performance and Provisional Budget Out turn	The Panel received the Annual Performance and Provisional Budget Out-turn report	Written Report	Saqib Yasin / Kevin Green
Hardley Depot Update	To receive an update on progress with the Hardley Depot Project.	Presentation	Presentation
Commercial and Residential Property Strategy Annual Report	To receive the Annual Report on progress with the Commercial and Residential Property Strategies	Written Report	Alan Bethune
Financial Strategy Task and Finish Group Arrangements	To agree the arrangements for this year's Financial Strategy Task and Finish Group Meetings	Discussion	Alan Bethune / Andy Rogers
Freeports Update	To receive an update on the latest position in respect of the Freeports Initiative	Presentation	Alan Bethune
Transformation Programme Update	To receive an update on progress with the Transformation programme.	Written Report	Rebecca Drummond

ITEM	OBJECTIVE	METHOD	LEAD OFFICER
19 SEPTEMBER 2024			
Citizens Advice New Forest Update	To receive a presentation on the work of Citizens Advice New Forest	Presentation	Citizens Advice New Forest
Procurement Update	To receive an update on procurement activity over the last year	Presentation	Gary Jarvis
ICT Strategy Delivery Update	To receive the Annual Update on progress with delivery of the ICT strategy	Presentation	Kim Gray / Rich Bird
Transformation Programme Update	To receive an update on progress with the Transformation programme.	Written Report	Rebecca Drummond
21 NOVEMBER 2024			
Complaints Annual Report	To receive an annual overview of complaints received, and dealt with by the Information Governance and Complaints Team	Written Report	Karen Grimes / Amanda Wilson
Asset Investment Strategy	to receive the end asset investment strategy and make any comments to Cabinet	Written Report	Alan Bethune
Council Tax Reduction Schemes Task and Finish Group Report	To receive the report of the Council Tax Reduction Schemes Task and Finish Group	Written Report	Ryan Stevens

ITEM	OBJECTIVE	METHOD	LEAD OFFICER
Financial Strategy Task and Finish Group Report	To receive the report of the Financial Strategy Task and Finish Group	Written Report	Alan Bethune / Andy Rogers
Transformation Programme Update	To receive an update on progress with the Transformation programme.	Written Report	Rebecca Drummond
23 JANUARY 2025			
Asset Maintenance and Replacement Programme	To receive details of the proposed programme and pass any comments to Cabinet.	Written Report	Alan Bethune
Capital Strategy	To receive details of the proposed strategy and pass any comments to Cabinet.	Written Report	Alan Bethune
Transformation Programme Update	To receive an update on progress with the Transformation programme.	Written Report	Rebecca Drummond
20 MARCH 2025			
Council Tax Reduction T&F – Arrangements for 2024	To agree arrangements for the Council Tax Reduction T&F meetings for 2024	Discussion	Ryan Stevens
Staff Efficiency Ideas	To receive the annual summary of ideas put forward by staff	Written report	Heleana Aylett
Transformation Programme Update	To receive an update on progress with the Transformation programme.	Written Report	Rebecca Drummond

ITEM	OBJECTIVE	METHOD	LEAD OFFICER
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TO BE CONFIRMED			
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Customer Services Update	to receive an update on changes to Customer Services Provision	Presentation	Ryan Stevens
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