

NOTICE OF MEETING

Meeting: CABINET

Date and Time: WEDNESDAY, 4 DECEMBER 2024 AT 10.00 AM

Place: COUNCIL CHAMBER - APPLETREE COURT, BEAULIEU ROAD, LYNDHURST, SO43 7PA

Enquiries to: democratic@nfdc.gov.uk
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PUBLIC INFORMATION:

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.

Members of the public are welcome to attend this meeting. The seating capacity of our Council Chamber public gallery is limited under fire regulations to 22.

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PUBLIC PARTICIPATION:

Members of the public may speak in accordance with the Council's [public participation scheme](#):

- (a) on items within the Cabinet'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 attend the meeting, or speak in accordance with the Council's public participation scheme, should contact the name and number shown above no later than 12.00 noon on Friday, 29 November 2024.

Kate Ryan
Chief Executive

Appletree Court, Lyndhurst, Hampshire. SO43 7PA
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AGENDA

Apologies

1. MINUTES

To confirm the minutes of the meeting held on 6 November 2024 as a correct record.

2. 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.

3. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

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

4. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN - UPDATE (Pages 3 - 22)

5. COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME 2025/26, POLICY REVIEW AND COUNCIL TAX PREMIUMS (Pages 23 - 42)

6. COUNCIL TAX 2025/26 - SETTING THE TAX BASE (Pages 43 - 52)

7. LEISURE - UPDATE AND PROPOSED FEES AND CHARGES 2025 (Pages 53 - 74)

8. HALF YEARLY UPDATE COMPLAINTS PERFORMANCE AND SERVICE IMPROVEMENT REPORT (Pages 75 - 126)

To:

Councillors

Jill Cleary (Chairman)
Steve Davies (Vice-Chairman)
Geoffrey Blunden

Councillors

Jeremy Heron
Dan Poole
Derek Tipp

Cabinet – 4 December 2024

Medium Term Financial Plan - Update

Purpose	For Decision
Classification	Public
Executive Summary	<p>This report</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presents the latest medium-term financial plan (MTFP) of the council. • Considers the ongoing development of the MTFP for the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) including the factors that will influence its delivery and that of the annual budget strategy 2025/26. • Develops the financial strategy to support the delivery of a legally balanced budget for 2025/26. • Details the ongoing budget planning process and timeline for key financial reports.
Recommendation(s)	<p>Cabinet is asked to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. note the revised MTFP forecasts, as outlined within the report and appendices 1 – 4. 2. endorse development of the options identified to close the budget gap for 2025/26 and through to 2028/29. 3. endorse the approach taken to set the Asset Maintenance and Capital Programme Budgets for 2025/26. 4. approve the continuation for 3 years of the annual £195,306 financial support provided to Citizens Advice New Forest (CANF), commencing 1 April 2025. 5. approve the latest forecast position with regards to the Waste transition and roll-out costs, noting that an increase in transition costs is offset

	through a forecast reduction in 2025/26 roll-out costs.
Reasons for recommendation(s)	<p>To comply with accounting codes of practice and best practice which requires councils to have a rolling multi-year MTFP.</p> <p>To provide Cabinet with the latest high-level overview of the MTFP.</p> <p>To consider the ongoing development of the MTFP and consider the factors that will influence its delivery and that of the annual budget strategy to support the delivery of a balanced budget for 2025/26.</p>
Ward(s)	All
Portfolio Holder(s)	Councillor Jeremy Heron - Finance & Corporate
Strategic Director(s)	Alan Bethune – Strategic Director Corporate Resources & Transformation (Section 151 Officer)
Officer Contact	<p>Paul Whittles Assistant Director - Finance 02380 285766 paul.whittles@nfdc.gov.uk</p>

Introduction and background

1. The Council has a legal requirement to set an annual fully funded balanced budget and must plan its finances over the medium-term period.
2. The Council's financial strategy seeks to achieve a balanced budget through the crystallisation of efficiencies driven through Council Transformation, supported with the targeting of new and additional income generation and align available financial resources, and create additional financial resources, to deliver on corporate priorities. Financial stability over the medium-to-long term has underpinned the Council's financial strategy, with due consideration being given to the potential implications that the Fair Funding Review, Business Rate Reset, and national rent setting policy will have on this Council. The Council has understood the need to consider its overall organisational business model in order to ensure the future protection of its services and seeks to align the financial plan to ensure delivery of key priorities as outlined in the Corporate Plan.

3. Actions need to continue on the development of future years' budgets. To support this work, it is necessary that an assessment is made of the likely financial scenario based upon latest available information. The October MTFP Scene Setting report is now updated for changes (including Council decisions) and reviews undertaken since.

Economic Commentary

4. The new Chancellor delivered the 2024 Autumn Statement on 30 October 2024. In summary the key elements of most relevance to the Council are:
 - a. Local Government Core Spending Power to increase by 3.2% in real terms in 2025/26.
 - b. Employer's National Insurance contributions increased by 1.2% to 15% and the threshold to commence paying was reduced from £9,100 to £5,000. Local Government is set to receive additional funding to compensate for the increase in 2025/26.
 - c. Changes to some Business Rate reliefs and the multiplier, and revaluations are expected in 2026.
 - d. Council tax increases of 5% expected to continue.
 - e. £1.3bn increase in Local Government grants.
 - f. HMT guaranteeing £1.1bn in Extended Producer Responsibility funding for 2025/26 (then likely to be whatever the scheme generates).
 - g. Additional £230m grant for homelessness support and prevention.
 - h. Additional £86m for Disabled Facility Grants (DFGs).
 - i. National Living Wage (NLW) will increase by 6.7% to £12.21 per hour.
 - j. Minimum wage for 18-20 year-olds will increase by 16% to £10 per hour.
 - k. HRA rent increases of CPI+1% for the next 5 years.
 - l. The discounted rate for HRA borrowing has been extended by 9 months to 31 March 2026.

5. The Council will not know the specific implications to NFDC in terms of the Finance Settlement funding support until the release of the Provisional Finance Settlement, which will be mid-December.
6. The Bank of England's base rate continues to fall and is currently 4.75% following the 0.25% reduction in November. Changes to the base rate can negatively impact the Council's interest earnings from investments and conversely can reduce the cost of borrowing required to support our Capital Programme.
7. CPI (Consumer Price Index) inflation is below the Bank of England's ongoing 2% target. As at September 2024 inflation was 1.7% compared to 6.7% a year earlier.
8. The National Employers Pay Award offer for 2024/25 was finalised in October 2024 with the increase in pay costs being covered within the 2024/25 approved budget (both for GF and HRA). Further detailed work is ongoing to inform the assumptions for 2025/26.
9. The General Fund Medium Term Financial Plan has been populated using the most up to date information currently available covering the period to 2028/29. The effect of the Fair Funding Review and final design of the Business Rate Retention Scheme as outlined in paragraph 2, including the timing of the initial reset, and frequency thereafter of partial or full resets, and the ultimate proportion of rates to be retained by the District Council, has the potential to significantly amend the funding figures currently forecast.
10. The Housing Revenue Account section of the report sets out the specific and unique challenges faced by this ring-fenced account.
11. The Council's overall financial planning needs to take into account inflation and the current cost of living faced by its residents and tenants when making difficult decisions on proposed Council Tax, Rent and Fees and Charges.
12. The report hereafter is split into 2 distinct sections before concluding as a single item. The first considers the General Fund (paragraphs 13 to 55), and paragraphs 56 to 59 considers a few specific elements regarding the Housing Revenue Account.

The General Fund

Update Medium Term Financial Plan (Appendix 1)

13. The October Medium Term Financial Plan - Scene Setting report outlined a forecast deficit to 2028/29 of £2.443 million. This assumed an annual increase in Council Tax, aligned to the flexibilities allowed by central government policy, which contributes

cumulative income growth of £1.466 million to 2028/29 (otherwise the forecast deficit would have been approaching £4 million).

14. Significant quantifiable (and net unfavourable) changes since the October reported position are as follows:

Provisional Finance Settlement

15. Due to the budget announcement and confidence regarding future core spending power the previously assumed £200,000 reduction in the finance settlement has been removed for 2025/26.

Fees and Charges

16. The Council took a decision to introduce new car parking and Keyhaven charges to take effect from 1 January 2025. The impact to the MTFP as a result of this decision is to the support the delivery of the 2025/26 MTFP by a net additional £250,000 and £25,000 per annum respectively.

Homelessness support

17. The previous assumption was an even tapered removal of the previous £1 million increase in budget over 3 years. Following the first year's reduction, ongoing demand in this area results in a need to sustain the remaining £667,000 budget, at least for the short-medium term.

Income decline

18. A rebasing of budgets regarding Building Control and Planning services due to an underlying reduction in income creates a £75,000 pressure relating to Building Control income and a £170,000 pressure relating to Planning income in 2025/26.

Vacancies

19. Crystallising the current long term vacancy positions totalling £75,000 within Revenue and Benefits, and £100,000 within Place services as referenced in the council's quarterly Financial Monitoring Reports has helped mitigate service pressures.

Council Tax Premium

20. A review of the underlying data following feedback from the sector has rebased the anticipated additional council tax income to this authority from second homes to £200,000 (down from £293,000).

Leisure contract income

21. Contractual income relating to leisure contracts is forecast to increase by an additional £460,000 over the MTFP period.

Waste

22. The MTFP allows for 3 elements of the Waste Strategy roll out;

Transition

- a. The original transition budget for 2024/25 is £286,000. The MTFP previously assumed an increase of £329,000 to £615,000 for 2025/26, before a reduction of £555,000 in 2026/27 to £60,000, followed by a final reduction of the remaining £60,000 for 2027/28. The estimated cost of transition was forecast to total £961,000 between financial years 2024/25 – 2026/27.
- b. Latest assumptions have increased the forecast requirement by £277,000. They now include confirmed costs of temporary bin storage (+£122,000) whilst roll-out takes place and an ongoing need for programme delivery support (+£144,000) through to the early parts of 2025/26. Table 1 summarises these adjustments, as well as some further minor timing changes to previously agreed sums;

c. **Table 1 – Updated Waste Strategy budgets**

	2024/25 £	2025/26 £	2026/27 £
Previous Cost Assumptions	286,000	615,000	60,000
Adjustments post October			
- Storage	+12,000	+110,000	0
- Waste Advisors	-48,000	-27,000	+70,000
- Communications	-13,000	+23,000	-10,000
- Project oversight/other	+16,000	0	0
- Programme Support	+72,000	+72,000	0
TOTAL ADJUSTMENTS	+39,000	+178,000	+60,000
December MTFP Position	325,000	793,000	120,000

Roll Out

- d. In readiness for the legal requirement to separately collect food waste by 1 April 2026, the October MTFP presented a forecast cost of roll-out totalling £1.4 million to 2025/26. This has subsequently been re-evaluated in accordance with the revised programme timeline, agreed by the Cabinet and Council in October.
- e. The total anticipated annual costs for the new service remain unchanged at £2.006 million. However, the timing of the revised costs improves the 2025/26 position by £300,000 (to +£1.1 million) compensating the increasing transition costs shown at paragraph 22b.

New Service Cost

- f. Previous assumptions made in terms of the anticipated cost of the new food waste collection service being funded through new burdens funding are still seen through in this updated report. This does however remain a risk to the council as no clarity has yet been provided on the calculation methodology that the government will use to determine the new burdens funding.
 - g. The Council's MTFP also makes an assumption of Extended Producer Responsibility funding to be received, assumed as likely to be part of the package within the new burdens' formulae. There is similarly a number of unknown quantities with this initiative, with the County still not yet committed on a waste disposal / recycling facility, as a result of delays in government finalising the legal and statutory requirements of 'simpler recycling'.
23. Further detailed analysis remains ongoing to validate the new assumptions of this complex project, with all financial assumptions requiring further work before being finalised ahead of setting the 2025/26 budget and updated MTFP in February.

Transformation

24. Further to the approval of the Transformation business case by Cabinet and Council in August 2024, the MTFP requires updating to reflect the financial implications. The business case referred to on-going new costs, to be ultimately offset through the gross savings expected to materialise. The timing of the introduction of the new on-going costs in comparison to the delivery of savings needs further consideration as we lead up to setting the 2025/26 budget in February.

25. The project to improve the utilisation of ATC and improve the East Wing for NFDC staff, to facilitate the letting of the South Wing is progressing, with updates on this project being reportable to the Resources & Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel on a regular basis.

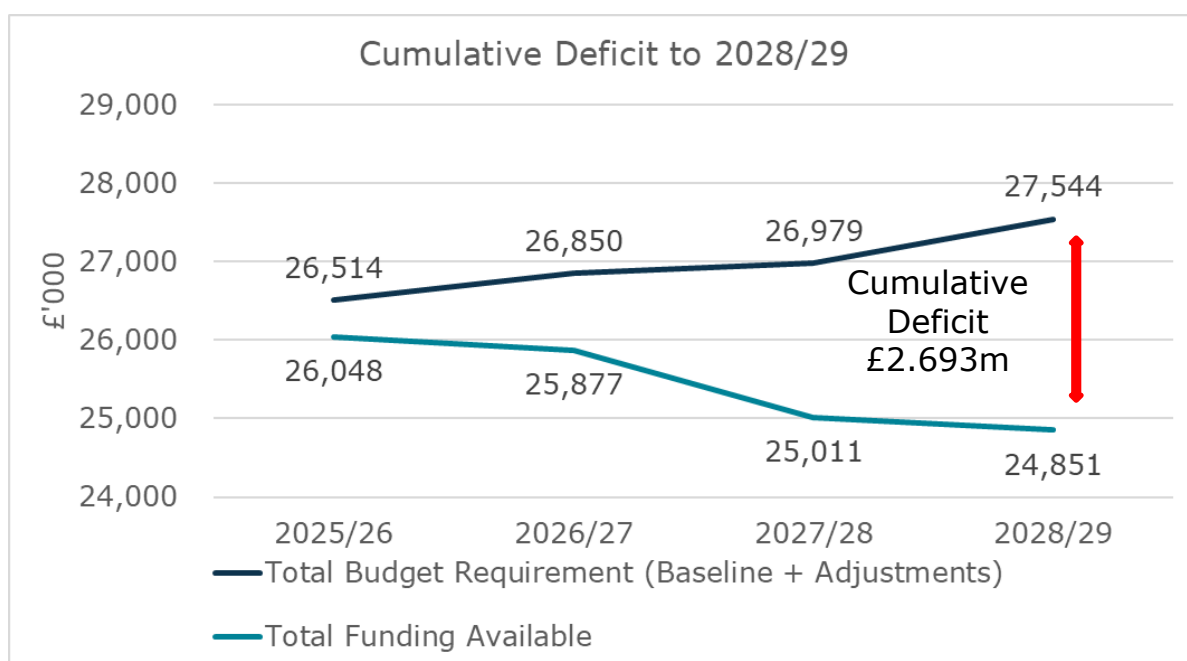
Revised MTFP Position

26. The resultant latest summary financial position showing the cumulative forecast deficit to 2028/29 is demonstrated in Table 2.

27. **Table 2 – Updated Forecast Deficit to 2028/29**

	2025/26 £	2026/27 £	2027/28 £	2028/29 £
October MTFP cumulative budget deficit	628,000	112,000	1,488,000	2,443,000
Net adjustments post October	-162,000	861,000	480,000	250,000
December MTFP update cumulative budget deficit	466,000	973,000	1,968,000	2,693,000

28. **Figure 1 – Cumulative Deficit to 2028/29**



29. Should the strategies regarding increased fees and charges, and net savings from the council transformation programme fail to bridge the remaining £466k budgetary shortfall in 2025/26, then the

council may be required to make use of the budget equalisation reserve.

30. The budget equalisation reserve value is currently £2.699m and should only be used in exceptional circumstances to support the delivery of a balanced budget.
31. Funding or part funding the one-off and unique additional costs regarding the transition to the new waste service totalling £1.1 million in 2025/26, currently contributing to the £466k budget gap, would be considered appropriate.

Other Financial Matters to Note

Citizens Advice New Forest (CANF)

32. The CANF board requested the Council consider and approve a 3-year funding agreement to secure longer term funding certainty, enabling CANF to budget and plan with greater certainty.
33. Following a report presented to the 19 September Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel, members of the panel were generally supportive of the continuation of a multi-year SLA to CANF. Taking on board the comments received at the panel, alongside consideration of the council's own Medium Term Financial Position, officers in consultation with the portfolio holder consider the best outcome is to offer CANF a further 3-year SLA to covers financial years 2025/26 - 2027/28, fixed at the 2024/25 value.
34. Consequently, £195,306 remains in the Council's MTFP to support the CANF annually until 31 March 2028.

Fees and Charges

35. Further to the October MTFP Scene setting report, work has commenced within services to analyse benchmarking data and review their NFDC fees and charges. Further work will be ongoing as we approach the budget setting in February.

Asset Maintenance and Replacement Programme (AMR)

36. The General Fund budget for 2024/25 includes a budget for asset maintenance and cyclical asset replacement totalling £2.5 million.
37. Table 3 shows the budgets approved for 2024/25 and demonstrates the indicative budgets for 2025/26, with the general £340,000 AMR budget to be allocated according to the priority order of bids submitted, as outlined further in paragraph 39 below;

38. **Table 3 – Asset Maintenance and Replacement Budget Allowance and Indicative Budget for 2025/26**

	2024/25 £'000 Approved February 2024
Health and Leisure Centres (Landlord maintenance)	750
ICT Replacement programme	150
AMR budget for 2024/25	340
Cyclical replacement of vehicles and plant	1,650
Proportion chargeable to the HRA	(390)
TOTAL	2,500

39. Services were invited to submit their project requirements during the month of October with the bids collectively scheduled to be reviewed by the Capital and Change Board (CCB) in the first instance in November.
40. Successful bids passed by CCB shall be presented to the Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel at its January meeting.
41. At this stage, via this report, the Cabinet is asked to endorse the approach being taken to set the Asset Maintenance and Replacement Programme Budget for 2025/26.

Capital

42. Services were similarly invited to submit their capital project requirements during the month of October with the bids collectively scheduled to be reviewed by the Capital and Change Board (CCB) in the first instance in November.
43. Successful bids passed by CCB shall be presented to the Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel at its January meeting.
44. The proposed capital programme to 2028/29 and its associated financing will be fully explored in the updated Capital Strategy for

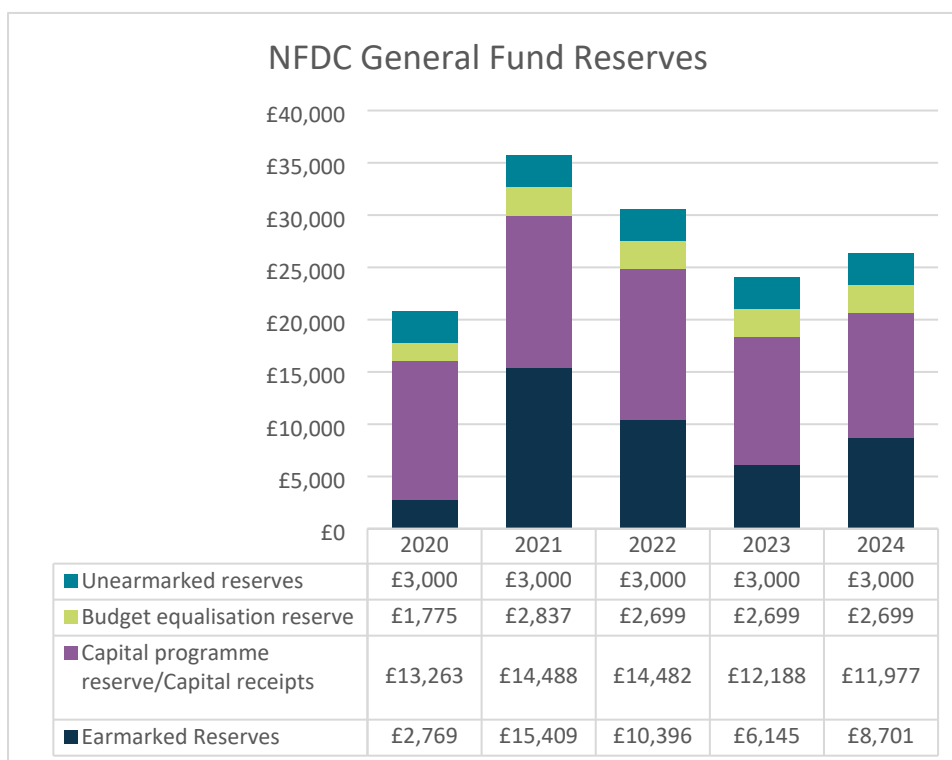
2025/26. Where appropriate the Council will use the flexibilities afforded to itself on the use of capital receipts to provide funding for transformation items.

45. At this stage, via this report, the Cabinet is asked to endorse the approach being taken to set the Capital Programme.

Reserves

46. The Council must ensure it retains unearmarked reserves at an appropriate level to provide adequate resources for any unforeseen pressures or to allow sufficient time for more considered mitigations to be put in place.
47. A minimum of 5% of net revenue expenditure is advised by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA). NFDC has £3 million representing c12% of net revenue expenditure.
48. In addition to unearmarked reserves the Council has a series of earmarked reserved set aside for specific spending purposes totalling £23.377 million as at 31 March 2024, including a:
 - a. £2.699 million budget equalisation reserve to manage short term budget gaps
 - b. £11.977 million reserve to support the Capital Programme
 - c. £1.500 million corporate priority reserve earmarked to support the transformation programme

49. **Table 4 – NFDC General Fund Reserves**



50. It is important to remember that reserves can only be used once and therefore do not represent a long-term solution to ongoing budget pressures and deficits.

Other

51. The Hampshire and Isle of Wight s151 group have concluded their consultation on the potential to pool business rates across Hampshire for 2025/26. In doing so the optimum membership of the pool was determined with NFDC falling just outside of it. Consequently, there are no further actions or decisions to be made and therefore no adjustments to the MTFP.

Budget Consultation

52. The Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel received feedback from the Financial Strategy Task and Finish group when the panel met 21 November 2024.

53. Based on this feedback Portfolio holders have been asked to consider specific aspects of their budget a refine them accordingly. This work is ongoing.

54. Additionally, the panel will also receive an overview of a few specific and key variable elements within the budget, namely the asset maintenance and replacement programme, and Capital programme at its January meeting.

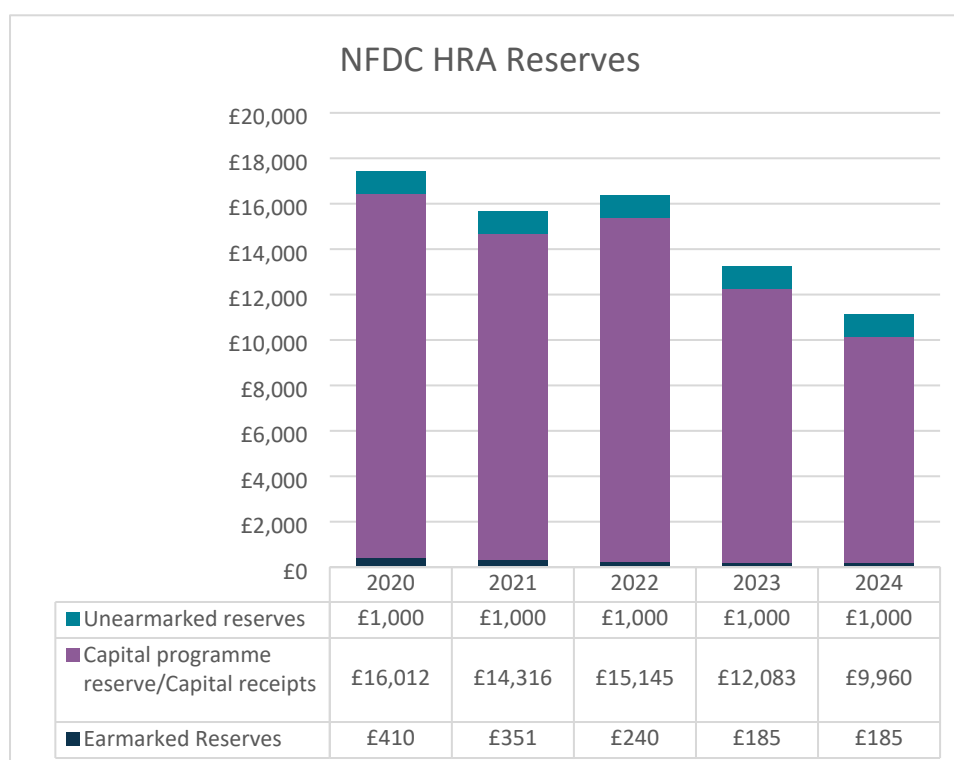
55. The Council is required to run an annual budget consultation with business rate payers. A consultation is planned conclude by the end of 2024.

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA)

Update Medium Term Financial Plan (Appendix 4)

56. The October Medium Term Financial Plan - Scene Setting report outlined a reduction in resources to support the HRA Capital Programme of £0.485 million over the period to 2028/29.
57. Significant changes since the October reported position are as follows:
- a. The changes to National Insurance will also impact on the HRA. Local Government is set to receive additional funding to compensate for the increase in 2025/26 but it is presently unclear how this will be provided to the HRA.
58. The HRA has reserves of £11.145 million including:
- a. £1.000 million unearmarked reserves
 - b. £9.960 million for housing acquisitions and development.

59. Table 5 – NFDC HRA Reserves



Reporting Timeline

60. It is important that the Medium-Term Financial Planning of both the General Fund and HRA supports the ambition of the Council and remains driven by the objectives set out in the Corporate Plan. The organisation must be able to support both and must remain vigilant and susceptible to change. An updated timeline is set out in Table 6, paragraph 60, which supports the development of the MTFP, through to the final setting of the 2025/26 budget.

61. Table 6 – Reporting Timeline

Item	Date	Meeting	Report
1	21 November 2024	<i>Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Financial Strategy Task and Finish Group feedback</i>
2	26 November	<i>Housing portfolio holder briefing</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Budget update</i>
3	4 December 2024	<i>Cabinet</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) Update</i>
4	16 January 2025	Tenant Involvement Group (TIG)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget update
5	22 January 2025	Housing and Communities Overview and Scrutiny	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposed Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget 2025/26
6	23 January 2025	Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asset Maintenance and Replacement Programme (AMR) and Capital Programme 2025/26 • Capital Strategy 2025/26 • Budget update
7	24 January 2025	Audit Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment Strategy • Treasury Management Strategy
8	5 February 2025	Cabinet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capital Strategy 2025/26 • Community Grants 2025/26 • AMR and General Fund Capital Programme 2025/26
9	24 February 2025	Cabinet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MTFP and Budget 2025/26 • HRA Budget and the housing sector capital expenditure budget

Corporate plan priorities

62. The Council's Medium Term Financial Plan sets out to align the financial resources available to meet and deliver on Corporate Plan Priorities. More will be done on this as the budget preparation process evolves, heading towards the February 2025 adoption date.

Options appraisal

63. The Council's Medium Term Financial Plan sets out to provide options in the ultimate achievement of a balanced budget. As noted, some options will be more or less palatable than others as the process evolves, but key to a sound MTFP is that decisions are taken in the context of the medium-long term, not the short-term.

Consultation undertaken

64. Internal consultation between finance officers, service managers and budget holders has informed the latest assumptions included in the report and will continue throughout this process.
65. Additional consultation with partners, external stakeholders, the Financial Strategy Task and Finish Group and portfolio holders will continue during the lead up to the February 2025 decision.

Financial and resource implications

66. This is a financial report; therefore, all financial and resource implications are contained within the body of the report.

Legal implications

67. The council has a fiduciary duty to its taxpayers to be prudent in the administration of the funds on their behalf and an equal duty to consider the interests of the community which benefit from the services it provides.
68. It is the responsibility of councillors to ensure the council sets a balanced budget for the forthcoming year. In setting, such a budget councillors and officers of the council have a legal requirement to ensure it is balanced in a manner which reflects the needs of both current and future taxpayers in discharging these responsibilities. In essence, this is a direct reference to ensure that Council sets a financially sustainable budget which is mindful of the long-term consequences of any short-term decisions.
69. As a billing authority, failure to set a legal budget by 11 March each year may lead to intervention from the Secretary of State under section 15 of the Local Government Act 1999. It should however be noted that the deadline is, in reality, the 1 March each year to allow

sufficient time for the council tax direct debit process to be adhered to.

Risk assessment

70. None at this stage.

Environmental / Climate and nature implications

71. None at this stage, although it is worthy to note that the Council's Medium-Term Financial Planning will need to seek to support the delivery of the Council's Climate and Nature Action Plan.

Equalities implications

72. None at this stage.

Crime and disorder implications

73. There are no direct implications regarding crime and disorder as a result of this report.

Data protection / Information governance / ICT implications

74. There are no direct implications regarding data protection, information governance or ICT as a result of this report.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Medium Term Financial Plan 2025-2029 - Summary of Resources

Appendix 2 – Medium Term Financial Plan 2025-2029 - Summary of Budget Requirement

Appendix 3 – Medium Term Financial Plan 2025-2029 – Options Identified to Close Budget Shortfall

Appendix 4 – Housing Revenue Account Medium Term Financial Plan 2025-2029 - Summary of Budget Requirement 2025/26-2028/29

Background Papers:

Cabinet 21 February 2024 – Budget Reports 2024/25

Housing Revenue Account Budget and the Housing Public Sector Capital Expenditure Programme 2024/25

Medium Term Financial Plan and Annual Budget 2024/25

[Medium Term Financial Plan – Scene Setting](#)

MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2025 - 2029

SUMMARY OF RESOURCES

	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29
Original					
Budget	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast
£'000's	£'000's	£'000's	£'000's	£'000's	£'000's
Total Government Determined Resources	9,898	10,753	10,141	8,831	8,223
Total Council Tax (Tax Base growth only)	14,459	15,095	15,536	15,980	16,428
Total Collection Funds	179	200	200	200	200
TOTAL FUNDING	24,536	26,048	25,877	25,011	24,851
Cumulative Change from Original 2024/25		1,512	1,341	475	315
%age change		6.2%	5.5%	1.9%	1.3%

MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2025 - 2029

SUMMARY OF BUDGET REQUIREMENT

	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29
	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast
	£'000's	£'000's	£'000's	£'000's
Baseline Funding 2024/25	24,536	24,536	24,536	24,536
Budget Adjustments 2025/26 - 2028/29				
Pay & Price Increases	1,560	720	720	720
Budget adjustments relating to one-off items	-357	0	-70	-100
Waste Service Changes	957	-1,073	-120	0
Ongoing Savings and Income Generation	-550	90	-20	-80
New Budget Requirements and Alignment of Budget to Priorities	368	599	-381	25
Cumulative effect of Known Budget Adjustments	1,978	2,314	2,443	3,008
Total Budget Requirement (Baseline + Adjustments)	26,514	26,850	26,979	27,544
Total Funding Available (as Appendix 1)	26,048	25,877	25,011	24,851
Estimated Cumulative Surplus / Shortfall (-)	-466	-973	-1,968	-2,693

MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2025 - 2029

OPTIONS IDENTIFIED TO CLOSE BUDGET SHORTFALL

Cumulative Property Investment Income

Cumulative Targeted Transformation Programme

Cumulative Targeted Fees and Charges Growth

MTFP 26/27 Potential Impacts....

Impact OR Mitigation: Business Rate Changes

Impact OR Mitigation: Fair Funding Review

Mitigation: EPR Income from HMT

Mitigation: Tax Raising Flexibilities

Mitigation: Reduce RCCO

Total of the Options Identified

Use of Equalisation Reserves (-) / Headroom +

2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29
Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast
£'000's	£'000's	£'000's	£'000's
100	350	350	350
328	786	1,329	1,656
225	475	625	775
+ / - ?	+ / - ?	+ / - ?	+ / - ?
+ / - ?	+ / - ?	+ / - ?	+ / - ?
- ?	- ?	- ?	- ?
- ?	- ?	- ?	- ?
653	1,611	2,304	2,781
187	638	336	88

Reserves Supporting the MTFP

General Fund Balance

Budget Equalisation Reserve

3,000	3,000	3,000	3,000	3,000
2,699	2,699	2,699	2,699	2,699

HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2025 - 2029

SUMMARY OF BUDGET REQUIREMENT 2025/26 - 2028/29

	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29
	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast
	£'000's	£'000's	£'000's	£'000's
Pay & Price Increases				
Pay Award (assumed 2%-2.5%)	160	150	150	150
Increments	65	65	65	65
Prices (third party contracts, utilities etc)	450	450	450	450
Total Pay & Price Increases	675	665	665	665
Other Budget adjustments				
Internal/External Financing Costs of Capital Programme	660	520	0	0
Total Other Budget adjustments	660	520	0	0
Cumulative Impact of Expenditure Increases and Adjustments	1,335	2,520	3,185	3,850
Ongoing Savings and Income Generation				
Rent Increases @ CPI +1%	-1,000	-1,030	-1,060	-1,100
Adjustment for 53 week rent year in 23/24	585			
Interest Receivable	160	80		
Total Ongoing Savings and Income Generation	-255	-950	-1,060	-1,100
Cumulative effect of Savings and Income Generation	-255	-1,205	-2,265	-3,365
Additional(-)/Reduced Resources to support Capital Programme	1,080	1,315	920	485

Cabinet – 4 December 2024

Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2025/26, Policy Review and Council Tax Premiums

Purpose	For decision
Classification	Public
Executive Summary	<p>The Council has a Council Tax Reduction scheme to support those on a low income with paying their council tax. The Council has discretion to set a local scheme for working age claimants, with pension age claims being administered in accordance with government regulations. The scheme is reviewed annually with proposed changes requiring Council agreement before coming into effect from 1 April.</p> <p>The Council has a Council Tax Support Scheme Prosecutions and Penalties policy for dealing with fraud and error. The policy has been reviewed as part of a cyclical review.</p> <p>The Council is introducing new council tax premiums from 1 April 2025 for long term empty properties and properties which are periodically occupied, commonly known as “second homes”. The report provides details of the Governments prescribed exceptions to these premiums.</p>
Recommendation	<p>That Cabinet recommend to Council the approval of:</p> <p>1. The changes to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme from 1 April 2025:</p> <p>a) The removal of the Band D cap at an overall cost to precepting authorities of £33k;</p> <p>b) The increase of the de-minimis rule to £2 at no net cost; and</p> <p>c) The alignment of childcare costs with Universal Credit for all claims at a saving of £3k to precepting authorities</p>

	2. The Council Tax Reduction Scheme Sanctions and Prosecution Policy
Reasons for recommendation	To approve changes to the Council Tax Reduction scheme from 1 April 2025 and the Council Tax Reduction Scheme Sanctions and Penalties policy.
Wards	All
Portfolio Holder	Councillor Jeremy Heron – Finance & Corporate
Strategic Director	Alan Bethune – Strategic Director Corporate Resources and Transformation
Officer Contact	Ryan Stevens Service Manager Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services 02380 285693 Ryan.stevens@nfdc.gov.uk

Introduction and background

1. The purpose of this report is to consider the recommendations of the Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel on the Council Tax Reduction scheme 2025/26, the Council Tax Reduction Scheme Sanctions and Penalties Policy, and to provide details of the governments exceptions to the empty home premium and second home premium which are being introduced from 1 April 2025.

Council Tax Reduction scheme

2. Local authorities are responsible for determining 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. The Council must formally approve the Council Tax Reduction Scheme no later than 11 March in any year, to take effect from 1 April.
4. The Council Tax Reduction Scheme fulfils the prescribed requirements for localised schemes.

5. There are currently 7,868 claimants receiving Council Tax Reduction. Of these 4,213 are working age and 3,655 are of pensionable age. Appendix 1 provides caseload trend data.
6. The current Council Tax Reduction Scheme costs approximately £10 million, with this cost (foregone Council Tax) being shared between all precepting authorities.
7. The amount of Council Tax Reduction awarded affects the tax base of each organisation.

Review process

8. A Task & Finish Group met to review the current scheme and discussed proposed changes effective from 1 April 2025.
9. The recommendations of the Task & Finish Group were considered by the Resources and Transformation Overview Scrutiny Panel who make recommendations to the Cabinet and full Council.

The current local Council Tax Reduction scheme

10. The council's Council Tax Reduction Scheme protects vulnerable households so that some of the changes to the scheme do not apply to them. A person is vulnerable if they (or a partner) are in receipt of Disability Living Allowance, Personal Independence Payments or Severe Disablement Allowance.
11. The council's current Council Tax Reduction Scheme includes:
 - A requirement for working age claimants (except vulnerable households) to pay a minimum of 10% of council tax.
 - 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 £35.00 a week of earnings.

Matters considered by Task and Finish Group

12. 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 2024/25 council tax bills increased by an average of 5%. This upward trend is likely to continue in the forthcoming years.

13. The Council Tax in-year collection rate for those in receipt of Council Tax Reduction, who are not a pensioner or vulnerable, is currently 77.6% (98.7% for non-Council Tax Reduction households) and during 2023/24 1,384 reminder notices were issued. There is administration and costs involved in collecting council tax, including dealing with customer queries, postage and making payment arrangements.
14. Many of the claimants have been affected by the increase in the cost of living, in particular fuel and food inflation which adversely affects low-income households. It is noted that there are some reports suggesting that Universal Credit rates are insufficient to meet day-to-day household expenditure. The Group considered recent budget announcements including the increase of Universal Credit being 1.7% from April 2025 and the freezing of the Local Housing Allowance from 1 April 2025, meaning those receiving support may experience further financial challenges if household living costs increase beyond that level of Universal Credit increase. There are also changes to Universal Credit and the amounts that can be deducted from third parties, meaning the recovery of council tax arrears will become harder.
15. The Group also considered the additional income from the Council's introduction of the Second Homes Premium, with the decision to implement this having been taken in February 2024. The current forecast overall net gain is just over £2 million per annum in additional income between all precepting authorities, with this income built into base MTFP assumptions by NFDC, and Hampshire County Council.

Discussion on proposed changes for 2025/26

16. The Task and Finish group reviewed various aspects of the current scheme. This included:
 - a) the 10% minimum contribution
 - b) the Band D cap
 - c) the de-minimis rule
 - d) childcare costs

A. The 10% minimum contribution

17. The Group discussed the principle of claimants having to pay an amount towards their council tax, which has been part of the scheme since 2013. Currently, any award of Council Tax Reduction

is based on 90% of the council tax liability (unless vulnerable, in which case it is based on 100% of the council tax liability), so there is a minimum contribution of at least 10% to pay. The proposal that was subject to consultation was to remove the 10% minimum contribution so that any award of Council Tax Reduction is based on 100% of the council tax liability.

18. The financial cost of this proposal is to increase the level of support (forego Council Tax) totalling approximately £297k per annum, affecting approximately 2,500 claimants, 1,000 of which currently receive the maximum level of support of 90% due to their income level.
19. From the consultation 59% strongly agreed or agreed with this proposal with 19% neither agreeing or disagreeing. The Group also considered the response from Hampshire County Council. Their response recognised that local authorities need to set schemes to support local needs, but due to their severe cost pressures of providing adult social care and children's social care they expressed "concerns about making schemes more generous if that would have a significant impact on income".
20. The Group discussed the consultation responses, and although sympathetic to Hampshire County Councils financial situation, on reflection and noting the additional income from the council tax premiums considered that the scheme should be further supporting our most vulnerable households; a key corporate plan objective.
21. The Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel, at its meeting on 21 November 2024, considered the recommendation of the Task and Finish group to remove the 10% minimum contribution. The Panel discussed the financial impact on both the Councils budget, and that of Hampshire County Council who have severe financial pressures, especially with the cost of supporting vulnerable people. It was noted that the District Council was having to sustain significant additional budget within the homelessness service, and had an overall financial deficit to address over the MTFP period in the region of £2.5m. The Panel also highlighted the additional support available to households, including the extension of the Household Support Fund for 2025/26 which provides targeted financial support with household bills to those struggling financially.
22. **The Panel recommend no change from the current scheme (retaining the 10% minimum contribution).**

B. Removal of the Band D cap

23. The Group discussed the principle of capping any Council Tax Reduction to a Band D. This proposal that was subject to consultation affects 100 claims and consideration was given to the collection rates amongst this cohort and the impact where households are placed into properties of Band E and above or require larger property due to household size.
24. The financial cost of this proposal is to increase the level of support by approximately £33k per annum.
25. From the consultation 53% strongly agreed or agreed with this proposal with 21% neither agreeing or disagreeing. The Group also considered the response from Hampshire County Council, which as above, expressed concerns about any changes that would make the scheme more generous and therefore impacting on their income. The Group discussed this response, and although sympathetic to Hampshire County Councils financial situation, on reflection considered that the scheme should be supporting our most vulnerable households; a key corporate plan objective, and recommended the removal of the cap.
26. **The Panel recommend removing the band D cap.**

C. The de-minimis rule

27. The proposed change that was subject to consultation was to increase the current de-minimis amount from £1 to £2, whereby any reduction in entitlement by up to £2 will not affect entitlement, which will remain at the existing level. This is to reduce administration, multiple bills being produced and reduce paper and costs.
28. From the consultation 73% strongly agreed or agreed with this proposal with 19% neither agreeing or disagreeing. The Group also considered the response from Hampshire County Council, who were supportive of this change to reduce administration and improve the scheme.
29. The financial cost of this proposal is to increase the level of support by £3k per annum, but there will be savings in terms of administration, paper and postage. The Group recommended this change.
30. **The Panel recommend increasing the de-minimis amount from £1 to £2.**

D. Child care costs

31. The proposed change that was subject to consultation was to align the treatment of child care costs with Universal Credit for all claims. Currently, those in continuous receipt of Council Tax Reduction from 31 March 2013 have a higher weekly disregard of child care from earnings in the assessment of entitlement, requiring monthly manual intervention. This change enables full automation and reduces administration.
32. From the consultation 66% strongly agreed or agreed with this proposal with 24% neither agreeing or disagreeing. The Group also considered the response from Hampshire County Council, who were supportive of this change to reduce administration and improve the scheme.
33. The financial cost of this proposal is to reduce the level of support by £3k, which will affect approximately 42 claimants, although as claims migrate to Universal Credit some will actually be better off. There is the availability of the Exceptional Hardship Payment scheme to support those affected whereby any reduction in entitlement causes exceptional financial hardship. The Group recommended this change.
34. **The Panel recommend aligning child care costs with Universal Credit for all claims.**

Consultation

35. The Council has a duty to consult on any changes to the scheme. The Council actively undertook a consultation exercise over a 6-week period, from 21 August 2024 to 4 October 2024, advertising on the council's website, social media, residents' email, as well as by telephone, and contacted Hampshire County Council.
36. The Council received 225 responses. The Group considered the responses in their discussions before finalising their recommendations to the panel.

Council Tax Reduction Scheme Sanctions and Prosecutions policy

37. The Group reviewed the current Council Tax Reduction Scheme Sanctions and Penalties policy, which provides details on dealing with fraud and error within the Council Tax Reduction scheme. Minor amendments were proposed, as there have been no changes to legislation, see Appendix 2.

38. **The Panel support the updated policy and recommend its approval and adoption with immediate effect.**

Council Tax premiums

39. The Council has approved two premiums from 1 April 2025, these being:

- reducing the length of time a 100% premium can apply for long term empty properties from 2 years to 1 year
- a 100% premium for properties which are furnished and periodically occupied, commonly referred to as “second homes”

40. Government have very recently provided legislation and accompanying guidance that stipulate specific exceptions where a premium cannot apply, some of which are time limited, whilst other exceptions are not, such as annexes that form part of a main dwelling, properties where year round occupation is restricted, or those living elsewhere in armed forces accommodation. The guidance and legislation allow local authorities to apply local discretion to their own schemes, should they so wish.

41. The Group considered three of the exceptions and whether to apply a local discretion, these being:

Class	Definition	Prescribed term
G	Dwellings being actively marketed for sale	12 months
H	Dwellings being actively marketed for let	12 months
M	Empty properties requiring or undergoing major repairs or structural alterations	12 months

42. Having considered the prescribed exceptions as above, and the Task and Finish Groups recommendation to apply local discretion to increase the exception period for Class G and M, the Panel considered the financial impact and that the prescribed period set by government is sufficient to encourage properties to be brought back into use.

43. Taxpayers, based on current known information, will be notified by letter of the forthcoming changes and to contact us should their circumstances change, or if an exception should be applied from 1 April 2025.

44. **The Panel recommended no local exceptions to Council Tax premiums.**

Corporate plan priorities

45. The contents of this report support our key priorities of our Corporate Plan by supporting low-income households and encouraging properties to be brought back into use.

Options appraisal

46. Details of the options and discussions are included in the paragraphs above.

Financial and resource implications

47. The proposed changes to the Council Tax Reduction scheme were discussed with the Group, with the additional total support amounting to circa £30k per annum, equating to approximately £3k to the Council, although there would be savings in administration, such as officer time and postage to be considered. The summarised costings are:

Option B – Additional cost of £33k

Option C – Cost neutral

Option D – Reduction in cost of £3k

48. The changes to the Council Tax Reduction scheme will reduce administration, which can be utilised elsewhere, including the administration of the new council tax premiums.

Legal implications

49. The Local Government Finance Act 2012 provided for the introduction of the localisation of Council Tax support by making changes to the Local Government Finance Act 1992. These require that:

- For each financial year, each billing authority must consider whether to revise its scheme or replace it with another scheme

50. In accordance with legislation, the Council has already made a determination at least one year prior to the financial year to which the premiums will apply. The Council must apply the legislated exceptions to the premiums where conditions are met.

Risk assessment

51. There are no risk assessments required.

Environmental / Climate and nature implications

52. There are no significant environmental or climate and nature implications arising from this report, although the recommendations will reduce the use of paper as fewer notices and bills will be issued.

Equalities implications

53. 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, as well as to provide additional advice and support where appropriate. The proposed changes to the scheme will provide additional support to those on a low income.

Crime and disorder implications

54. There are no crime and disorder implications arising directly from this report.

Data protection / Information governance / ICT implications

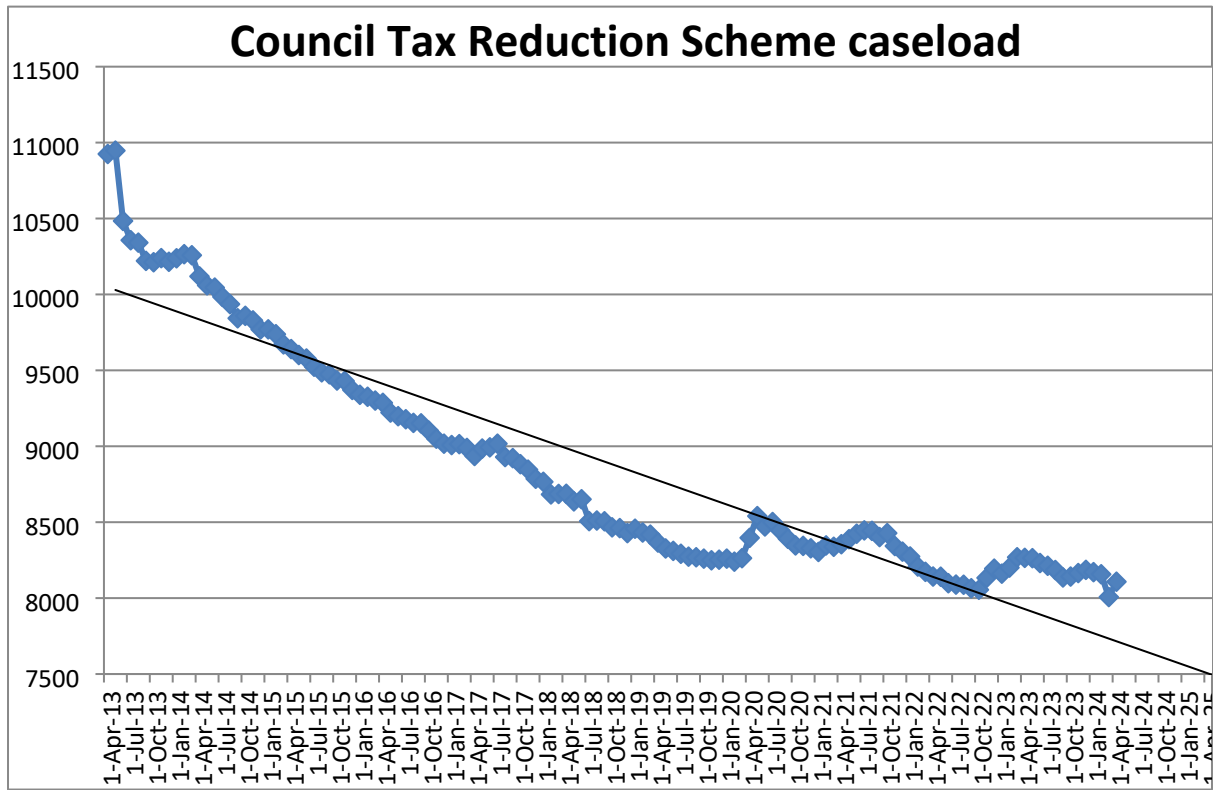
55. There are no data protection, information governance or ICT implications arising from this report.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Caseload trends
Appendix 2 – The Council Tax
Reduction Scheme Sanctions and
Penalties Policy

Background Papers:

Appendix 1 – Caseload Trends



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Council Tax Reduction Scheme Prosecutions and Penalties Policy

Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services

November 2024

1. Introduction

1.1 New Forest District Council (“The Council”) is responsible for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and therefore, has a duty to prevent and detect fraudulent claims as part of its commitment to protecting public funds. The Councils Fraud Policy makes it clear that fraud in any form will not be tolerated and the Council is committed to applying the most appropriate sanctions to those it believes have obtained Council Tax Reduction fraudulently.

2. Aims

2.1 The aim of the policy is to:

- provide proportionate but robust sanctions to deal with those suspected of fraud.
- deter those in receipt of Council Tax Reduction from committing fraud
- deter those who have committed fraud from re-offending
- underpin good governance in accordance with the Councils Fraud Policy

3. Legislation

3.1 This policy has regard to the following legislation:

- The Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Detection of Fraud and Enforcement) (England) Regulations 2013

3.2 There are two main offences under this legislation:

- False representation and
- Failure to notify a change of circumstances

3.4 False Representation

3.5 Regulation 7 creates an offence where a person makes a statement or representation which he or she knows to be false for the purpose of obtaining a reduction under a Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

3.6 It is also an offence for a person to provide or knowingly cause or allow to be provided a document or information which that person knows to be false in a material particular.

3.7 Failure to notify a change in circumstances

3.8 Regulation 8 creates an offence where there has been a change of circumstances which a person knows affects their entitlement to a reduction, and the person fails to give notice of the change as required by the authority’s scheme.

3.9 Regulation 11 of the Council Tax Reduction schemes (Detection of Fraud and Enforcement) (England) Regulations 2013, enables an authority to invite a person

to agree to pay a penalty as an alternative to prosecution for an offence relating to the award of a reduction under a Council Tax Reduction Scheme which a person was not entitled to, or an offence relating to an act or omission which could have resulted in such an award.

3.10 Regulations 12 and 13 of the Council Tax Reduction schemes (Detection of Fraud and Enforcement) (England) Regulations 2013, enable a billing authority to impose a penalty of £70 on a person in circumstances such as where a person negligently:

- Makes an incorrect statement in connection with an application for a reduction under a council tax reduction scheme or
- Where a person fails to notify a change of circumstances when required to do so under a scheme.

4. Roles and responsibilities

4.1 All staff within the Revenues and Benefits Service have a responsibility to ensure accuracy of awards, procedures are followed and referrals made to the Corporate Fraud and Compliance Officer where appropriate. Managers are responsible for maintaining procedures and controls and compliance.

5. Investigation for suspected fraud

5.1 If the council suspects a person of giving them wrong or misleading information, they may be investigated to establish if any fraud offences have occurred. The council could ask them to attend an interview known as an Interview Under Caution if we suspect an offence may have occurred. The council will give at least 5 days' notice for the interview and the person affected may bring someone to accompany them which could include a legal representative. The Council will decide who can attend the interview.

5.2 Following the Interview under caution a decision will be made as to the next steps, which could include prosecution, an Administration Penalty or a £70 penalty as detailed below. Each case will be looked at on an individual basis.

5.3 Legal proceedings can start at any time within the period of twelve months from the alleged commission of the offence.

6. Council Tax Reduction (CTR) – Penalties and Prosecution

6.1 All sanction decisions will be consistent, balanced and fair and relate to the degree and nature of the offence. The Council will decide the degree or type of sanction to be used in each individual case. In coming to any decision many factors will be taken into account including the seriousness of the offence, the value of the overpayment, the length of the fraud, the vulnerability of the claimant, and the health and age of the claimant.

6.2 Written warnings

6.2.1. A written warning may be issued where there has been an offence and to warn about future behaviour so as to act as a deterrent. A written warning may be issued where:

- The person has not previously been investigated for a Council Tax Reduction scheme offence
- The amount of any Council Tax Reduction where there is no entitlement is less than £1,000

6.2.2 The Council will take into consideration the following factors when deciding if a written warning is appropriate:

- The persons wilfulness in committing the offence
- The persons attitude, for example if regret is expressed for their actions
- Any other mitigating factor

6.3. Administrative Penalties

6.3.1 If the Council is satisfied that an offence has occurred we may ask the person to pay a penalty instead of prosecuting them. If the penalty is paid, they will not be prosecuted for that offence. Any penalty paid will be in addition to repaying any Council Tax Reduction they were not entitled to.

6.3.2 The penalty will be 50% of the Council Tax Reduction awarded which the claimant was not entitled to, with a minimum payment of £100 and a maximum payment of £1,000. If a person did not actually get any Council Tax Reduction, for example the person made a false claim, the penalty will be £100.

6.3.3 An Administrative Penalty is appropriate when:

- The Department for Work and Pensions have administered an Administrative Penalty for Housing Benefit which the claimant has accepted.
- The case is suitable for prosecution and satisfies the council's prosecution procedures:
- The case is not so serious that the first option should be prosecution;
- The excess payment of Council Tax Reduction that the person was not entitled to is less than £3,000.00
- The customer has not received a sanction for a Council Tax reduction offence in previous 5 years (the scheme started in April 2013)

6.3.4 There is no requirement for the person to admit the offence before an Administrative Penalty can be offered.

6.3.5 An Administrative Penalty is not appropriate when:

- The person has been convicted of Council Tax Reduction fraud in past 5 years (the scheme started in April 2013)

- The person has accepted an Administrative Penalty in the previous 5 years
 - the fraud continued over a long period;
 - the fraud was calculated and deliberate, for example the person planned it from the outset by making a false statement on a new or repeat claim form. In these cases, the full circumstances of the case will be considered to enable a balanced judgement to be made to decide whether an Administrative Penalty or prosecution of the person is appropriate.
- 6.3.6 A person will be requested to attend an interview if the Council believes an offence may have occurred. The interview will be conducted by an authorised officer from the council. The council will give at least 5 days' notice for the interview and the person affected may bring someone to accompany them which could include a legal representative
- 6.3.7 Where a person does not attend an interview and does not contact the office within 5 working days to provide an explanation and arrange a further appointment, a final appointment will be arranged with them. If the person fails to attend this appointment, the Council will consider the case for prosecution.
- 6.3.8 If the person accepts an Administrative Penalty the council will notify the person in writing. In accordance with legislation, the person has 14 days, known as the *cooling off period*, to decline the Administrative Penalty. Where the person accepts the Administrative Penalty they are required to sign and return the *agreement form*. Where a person withdraws their agreement, which must be received in writing, the case will be submitted for prosecution. If after 14 days, the person has made no contact with the council, the Administrative Penalty will be deemed as accepted.
- 6.3.9 If a person declines to accept the Administrative Penalty, the case will be considered for prosecution. The court will be informed that the person refused to accept an Administrative Penalty.

6.4 Paying the Administrative Penalty

- 6.4.1 An invoice will be issued for the recovery of the Administrative Penalty and a payment plan can be arranged for the payment of the invoice. When agreeing the payment plan the council will consider affordability. Where the penalty is not paid, the Sundry Income Team will recover the debt by any means available to them, this may include using Collection Agents or court
- 6.4.2 If, after imposing an Administrative Penalty, the council revises the amount of Council Tax Reduction that the person is not entitled to, the council will revise the Administrative Penalty. Where the amount is lower, the person will be repaid any excess sums paid. Where the Administrative Penalty is to be paid in instalments, this should ensure that full payment is to be paid no later than one month before the end of the period to issue a prosecution, so that consideration should be given to whether a prosecution should be issued if the payments are not made.

6.5 Prosecution

- 6.5.1 Prosecution is the ultimate sanction available to the Council and will be considered. The matter will be referred to Legal Services to determine whether prosecution is in the public interest, whether the claimant is fit to be prosecuted and whether the evidence has passed the evidential sufficiency test i.e. the Council must be satisfied that there is sufficient evidence to provide a 'realistic prospect of conviction' against every defendant on every charge and has been obtained in an appropriate manner.

7. Giving false information to get Council Tax Reduction

- 7.1 The council may prosecute a person if they give wrong information when they apply for Council Tax Reduction.
- 7.2 The council may prosecute if the person claiming deliberately gave wrong information when they applied for Council Tax Reduction. The council might also prosecute a person if they encouraged a claimant to give wrong information on their behalf. For example, a partner, member of the household or someone who assisted in completing a document might be prosecuted if they told the council that they were not working or had no savings when they knew this to be false.

8. Failure to notify a change in your circumstances

- 8.1 If someone is already getting Council Tax Reduction, they might be prosecuted if they do not notify the council about any change in their circumstances which they know affects their entitlement to Council Tax Reduction or the amount they receive. For example, the person should notify the council if they start a job or if a partner comes to live with them. They need to do this promptly. This means notifying the council within 21 days of the date of change, or as soon as possible if unable to notify within 21 days.
- 8.2 A person can also be prosecuted if they deliberately encourage or allow someone else not to notify changes affecting their Council Tax Reduction entitlement.
- 8.3 Paying a penalty for giving wrong information or for not notifying the council about a change in circumstances**
- 8.4 The council will not always prosecute when a person gives wrong information or fails to notify a change in circumstances. Instead, they may ask the customer to pay a £70.00 penalty. The council may ask a person to do this if they negligently make an incorrect statement in connection with an application or because a person did not notify the Council about a change in their circumstances which they should have known would affect their Council Tax Reduction award.
- 8.5 The council will not ask for the £70.00 penalty to be paid if a person is being prosecuted or if they are being asked to pay an Administrative Penalty as an alternative to being prosecuted.

- 8.6 A person may not have to pay a penalty if they have taken reasonable steps to correct their mistake. Taking reasonable steps might include contacting the council as soon as they realise they had made a mistake.
- 8.7 The £70.00 penalty is in addition to repaying any Council Tax Reduction the customer should not have received.
- 8.8 There is no appeal right of appeal against the penalty. However, if a person successfully appeals a decision about their Council Tax Reduction, which reduces the overpayment to zero, the council may withdraw the penalty.
- 8.9 An invoice will be issued for the recovery of the Penalty and a payment plan can be arranged for the payment of the invoice. Where the penalty is not paid, the Income Recovery Team will recover the debt by any means available to them.

9. Joint working with the Department for Work and Pensions

- 9.1 Joint working is a collaborative approach to fraud investigations, including information and intelligence sharing and two-way communication leading to a joint interview under caution, a single prosecution file preparation, a single prosecution or other outcome. The Council will proactively work with the Department for Work and Pensions to investigate where fraud has allegedly been committed and where evidence is sufficient to warrant further prosecutions.

10. Communicating the policy

- 10.1 The council will publish this policy on the website and refer to it on decision notices to all recipients of a Council Tax Reduction and on application forms.
- 10.2 Staff will undertake annual fraud awareness training and fraud awareness will be continually promoted.

11. Performance Monitoring

- 11.1 The council will monitor:
- the number and type of penalty
 - payments received
 - the number of appeals and the outcome
- 11.2 The council will use this information to review procedures and policy where appropriate.

12. Policy Review

- 12.1 The council will review this policy every three years or earlier if there is new legislation.

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Cabinet – 4 December 2024

Council Tax 2025/26 – Setting the Tax Base

Purpose	For decision
Classification	Public
Executive Summary	The Council sets the tax base each year being an annual calculation which sets out the estimated number of chargeable dwellings in the district, expressed at the number of Band D equivalents. This report provides details of the tax base for 2025/26 and the calculation process.
Recommendation	<p>That Cabinet recommend to Council the approval of:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. the calculation of the tax base for the year 2025/26 of 73,355.0 2. pursuant to this report and in accordance with the Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) (England) Regulations 2012, the amount calculated by this Council as its council tax base for the year 2025/26 as detailed in paragraph 13.
Reasons for recommendation	To approve the tax base for determining budget setting and the amount of council tax to levy.
Wards	All
Portfolio Holder	Councillor Jeremy Heron – Finance & Corporate
Strategic Director	Alan Bethune – Strategic Director Corporate Resources and Transformation
Officer Contact	<p>Ryan Stevens Service Manager Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services 02380 285693 Ryan.stevens@nfdc.gov.uk</p>

Introduction and background

1. The purpose of this report is to enable Members to approve the tax base for 2025/26.
2. Setting the tax base is an integral part of the Budget setting process and the determination of Council Tax levels. The tax base must be calculated in accordance with the Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) Regulations 2012, and the calculation has to be set between 1 December and 31 January. The approved tax base must be notified to the County Council by 31 January.
3. The tax base is a yearly calculation and represents the estimated number of dwellings to which council tax is chargeable and is set to a "Band D equivalent" figure. The Valuation Office Agency allocate each domestic dwelling into one of eight valuation bands (A to H) for council tax purposes, with different proportions of tax payable by each band.
4. The tax base is the estimated number of dwellings in the District, modified to take account of the different proportions payable, and any premiums, discounts, exemptions and other reductions. The Council's Medium Term Financial Plan includes an assumption of additional Council Tax collection based on an expectation of annual growth in the Tax Base, pursuant to the Local Plan and required housing growth targets.
5. The calculation of the tax base for tax setting also includes an estimated allowance for non-collection.
6. Separate calculations are required of the tax base for each Parish.

The Calculation Process

7. The starting point is the number of properties in each council tax valuation band, which is then adjusted to allow for estimates of:
 - The number of properties estimated as being exempt as not all properties are liable to pay council tax
 - The number of demolished properties due to be removed from the valuation list
 - The number of properties that have a disabled band reduction, where eligible properties are treated as being in the band below the one in which it is actually valued (for dwellings in Band A they pay 5/9th of the Band D charge)
 - The number of properties that have a 25% or 50% discount (i.e. single person discount)

- The number of properties where a 100% discount will apply for one month only, due to being unoccupied and unfurnished ('void') dwellings.
 - Known growth where a completion notice has been issued for a property but a valuation banding has not been received from the Valuation Office Agency
 - The estimated number of properties subject to an Empty Homes Premium, where the period of time for the 100% premium is reducing from 2 years to 1 year from the 1 April 2025
 - The estimated number of properties subject to the Second Homes Premium of 100%, which is being introduced from 1 April 2025. This is largely attributable for the increase in the overall tax base for 2025/26.
8. The resultant net number of dwellings is multiplied by the relevant proportions to ascertain equivalent Band D properties. The relevant proportions are shown in Appendix 1.
 9. The Council Tax Reduction scheme (CTR) operates as a discount on claimants Council Tax bills to support households on a low income with paying their council tax bills, with the effect of reducing the council tax base. The value of CTR awarded to pensioners and those of working age is dependent on their circumstances and are aggregated to arrive at the total council tax reduction. These values are converted into the tax base and band D equivalents. The number of recipients remains constant, at approximately 8,000, and the proposed changes to the Council Tax Reduction scheme for 2025/26 will affect the overall figure but cannot be included in this years calculation.
 10. The next step of the calculation is to assess the likely in-year collection rate and thereby make an appropriate allowance for non-collection. The estimated in-year collection rate for 2025/26 is 98.5%, which takes into consideration our consistent record of good performance in Council Tax collection in recent years, the impact of the cost of living, and is considered prudent. Contributions in lieu for Ministry of Defence dwellings are then added. A summary of the whole calculation process is shown in Appendix 3.
 11. The figures used in the calculation process are based on latest actuals at a given date. Appendix 2 shows 2025/26 tax base compared to 2024/25.
 12. Although there may be some growth in the tax base in the forthcoming year, for example new developments, it is advisable to take a prudent approach. If dwellings are improved and/or extended, council tax valuation bandings only normally change after a subsequent sale or the granting of a lease of 7 years or more.

Tax base for 2025/26

13. The tax base for 2025/26 is 73,355.0. For each Town and Parish the tax base is as follows:

TOWN/PARISH	TAX BASE 25/26
Ashurst & Colbury	952.2
Beaulieu	541.6
Boldre	1,094.5
Bramshaw	347.4
Bransgore	1,864.5
Breamore	189.4
Brockenhurst	1,969.8
Burley	830.5
Copythorne	1,236.9
Damerham	252.1
Denny Lodge	162.0
East Boldre	389.6
Ellingham, Harbridge & Ibsley	650.7
Exbury & Lepe	121.4
Fawley	4,625.6
Fordingbridge	2,576.9
Godshill	230.2
Hale	269.5
Hordle	2,472.1
Hyde	533.9
Hythe & Dibden	7,511.6
Lymington & Pennington	7,716.4
Lyndhurst	1,507.8
Marchwood	2,073.2
Martin	197.9
Milford on Sea	3,031.5
Minstead	384.0
Netley Marsh	837.4
New Milton	10,741
Ringwood	5,507.3
Rockbourne	167.8
Sandleheath	302.1
Sopley	406.7
Sway	1,752.6
Totton & Eling	9,542.8
Whitsbury	107.1
Woodgreen	257.0
Whole District	73,355.0

14. The overall Band D equivalent **net dwellings** has increased by 98.3 (0.13%) from 2024/25 to 2025/26, the higher this growth in dwelling numbers the higher the tax base and consequent council tax yield. This level of net growth is below the Council's MTFP forecast assumption, and so will result in lower Council Tax growth for 2025/26 than originally anticipated.

Corporate plan priorities

15. The setting of the tax base is a legal requirement and supports our corporate priorities by ensuring we are financially responsible and manage our finances prudently.

Options appraisal

16. The Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) Regulations 1992 set out the requirements for the calculation of the council tax base for tax setting purposes. Therefore, there are no alternative options.

Financial and resource implications

17. The calculation of the tax base is a key part of the annual budget cycle and the Council needs to determine the council tax base for the financial year 2025/26 to enable the required level of Council Tax to be calculated for that year.
18. The tax base figures provided within Appendix 2 of this report have been communicated to town and parish councils so that they can start to factor these into their budget setting process.
19. Any Council Tax surplus/deficit on the Collection Fund will be shared between the Principal Authorities, pro rata to the demand/precept on the fund for the year concerned.

Legal implications

20. There is a legal requirement to set the tax base. Members should be aware of the provisions of Section 106 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, which applies to members where
 - (a) they are present at a meeting of the Council, the Cabinet or a Committee and at the time of the meeting an amount of Council Tax is payable by them and has remained unpaid for at least two months; and
 - (b) any budget or Council Tax calculation, or recommendation or decision which might affect the making of any such calculation, is the subject of consideration at the meeting.
21. In these circumstances, any such members shall at the meeting and as soon as practicable after its commencement disclose the fact that

Section 106 applies to them and shall not vote on any question concerning the matter in (b) above. It should be noted that such members are not debarred from speaking on these matters. Failure to comply with these requirements constitutes a criminal offence, unless any such members can prove they did not know that Section 106 applied to them at the time of the meeting or that the matter in question was the subject of consideration at the meeting

Risk assessment

22. There are no risk assessments required.

Environmental / Climate and nature implications

23. There are no environmental or climate and nature implications arising from this report.

Equalities implications

24. There are no equality implications arising from this report.

Crime and disorder implications

25. There are no crime and disorder implications arising from this report.

Data protection / Information governance / ICT implications

26. There are no data protection, information governance or ICT implications arising from this report.

Conclusion

27. The setting of the tax base is a legal requirement and the regulations require that the tax base be formally approved for each parish/town Council area, with the calculations being approved through a resolution by the Council.

28. A prudent approach is taken in forecasting the tax base. Clearly, there is an obligation to ensure that sufficient funds are realised to meet the Council's expenditure. A realistic collection rate has to be determined. It is important that the tax base is not overstated, as any shortfall will result in interest costs falling on the Council's General Fund.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Valuation Bands
Appendix 2 – Tax Base comparison
Appendix 3 – Calculation summary

Background Papers:

The Local Authorities (Calculation of Tax Base) (England) Regulations 2012

VALUATION BANDS

All dwellings have been valued by the Valuation Office Agency, based on property prices at April 1991. There are eight valuation bands and each dwelling has been placed into one of these bands according to its assessed value at that time. Band A is the lowest. The higher the band, the higher the council tax charge will be. See the table below:-

BAND	RANGE OF VALUES	PROPORTION
A	Up to£40,000	£1.00
B	Over£40,000 -£52,000	£1.17
C	Over£52,000 -£68,000	£1.33
D	Over£68,000 -£88,000	£1.50
E	Over£88,000 -£120,000	£1.83
F	Over£120,000 -£160,000	£2.17
G	Over£160,000 -£320,000	£2.50
H	Over£320,000	£3.00

For every £1.00 of Council Tax for a band 'A' property, a band 'B' property will be charged £1.17 - and so on. Any discounts and reductions would make the difference less than this.

TAX BASES FOR 2025/26 COMPARED TO PREVIOUS YEAR 2024/25

PARISH/TOWN	TAX BASE 24/25	TAX BASE 25/26	CHANGE
Ashurst & Colbury	939.9	952.2	12.3
Beaulieu	511.9	541.6	29.7
Boldre	1,067	1,094.50	27.5
Bramshaw	337.8	347.4	9.6
Bransgore	1,846.8	1,864.50	17.7
Breamore	185.7	189.4	3.7
Brockenhurst	1,911.1	1,969.80	58.7
Burley	809.2	830.5	21.3
Copythorne	1,235.7	1,236.90	1.2
Damerham	248.3	252.1	3.8
Denny Lodge	159.2	162	2.8
East Boldre	384.4	389.6	5.2
Ellingham, Harbridge & Ibsley	632	650.7	18.7
Exbury & Lepe	116.3	121.4	5.1
Fawley	4,634.5	4,625.60	-8.9
Fordingbridge	2,423.8	2,576.90	153.1
Godshill	225	230.2	5.2
Hale	267.7	269.5	1.8
Hordle	2,434.2	2,472.10	37.9
Hyde	519.8	533.9	14.1
Hythe & Dibden	7,482.5	7,511.60	29.1
Lymington & Pennington	7,529.6	7,716.40	186.8
Lyndhurst	1,478.5	1,507.80	29.3
Marchwood	2,075.2	2,073.20	-2
Martin	200.3	197.9	-2.4
Milford on Sea	2,938.7	3,031.50	92.8
Minstead	374.4	384	9.6
Netley Marsh	818	837.4	19.4
New Milton	10,619.4	10,741	121.6
Ringwood	5,501.6	5,507.30	5.7
Rockbourne	169.9	167.8	-2.1
Sandleheath	299.6	302.1	2.5
Sopley	392.4	406.7	14.3
Sway	1,731.8	1,752.60	20.8
Totton & Eling	9,511.7	9,542.80	31.1
Whitsbury	104.7	107.1	2.4
Woodgreen	252.9	257	4.1
Whole District	72,371.5	73,355.0	983.50

Appendix 3

	SUMMARY									
	DIS. A	BAND A	BAND B	BAND C	BAND D	BAND E	BAND F	BAND G	BAND H	TOTAL
Total no. of dwellings	0	7290	12239	18264	19438	13677	7161	4689	624	83382
Active exemptions	0	382	248	318	441	203	94	64	6	1756
Demolished and to be removed	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
No. dwellings subject to disabled reduction	0	33	86	183	192	173	75	60	25	827
No. of disabled band reductions	33	86	183	192	173	75	60	25	0	827
No. of dwellings adjusted for disabled relief	33	6960	12088	17955	18978	13376	7052	4590	593	81625
No. entitled to 25% discount	14	4164	5546	6093	5799	3259	1435	774	80	27164
No. of dwellings entitled to 50% discount		176	41	25	37	29	38	39	6	391
No. entitled to 100% discount		41	38	30	22	13	15	2	1	162
Total discounts	14	4562.88	5655.56	6160.52	5878.48	3325.08	1516.1	852.68	92.34	28057.64
Discount deduction	3.5	1140.72	1413.89	1540.13	1469.62	831.27	379.03	213.17	23.09	7014.42
Net dwellings	29.5	5819.28	10674.1	16414.9	17508.4	12544.73	6672.97	4376.83	569.91	74610.58
No. subject to a premium (100%)	0	5	11	14	8	8	4	2	0	52
No. subject to a premium (200%)	0	19	4	12	1	2	8	0	0	46
No. subject to a premium (300%)	0	5	2	0	1	3	0	3	0	14
Adjusted net dwellings	29.5	5877.28	10699.1	16452.9	17521.4	12565.73	6692.97	4387.83	569.91	74796.58
Band D equivalents	16.4	3918.2	8321.5	14624.8	17521.4	15358.1	9667.6	7313.1	1139.8	77880.9
Reduction due to CTR band D equiv	5.42	923.47	1406.11	1320.78	594.73	244.74	62.08	17.02	2.18	4576.53
Adjusted band d equivalents	11.18	2994.72	6915.42	13303.99	16966.65	15113.37	9605.54	7296.03	1137.64	73344.5
Empty homes premium	0	14.8	11.6	18.4	26	16.4	10.4	9.6	0.8	108.0
Second homes premium	0	48.8	53.2	98.4	170.8	121.6	95.6	82.8	16.8	688.0
Adjusted band D equivalents	11.18	3037.33	6965.8	13407.8	17164	15282.04	9758.71	7450.18	1172.82	74249.95
									98.5% Collection rate	73136.2
									Contributions in lieu	218.8
									Tax base	73355.0

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Cabinet – 4 December 2024

Leisure – Update and Proposed Fees and Charges 2025

Purpose	For Decision
Classification	Public
Executive Summary	<p>This report</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides the latest update regarding the Council’s Leisure partner, Freedom Leisure, including proposals to the ongoing pricing structure. Seeks Council approval for changes to the pricing structure which required such approval in line with the terms of the contract with Freedom Leisure
Recommendation(s)	<p>Cabinet is asked to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> note the operational update from the Council’s leisure partner recommend that Council approves the proposed increases in fees and charges as set out in Appendix 1.
Reasons for recommendation(s)	<p>To ensure greater understanding of the current position regarding delivery of the Council’s leisure service.</p> <p>To comply with the contractual arrangements relating to price increases.</p>
Ward(s)	All
Portfolio Holder(s)	<p>Councillor Jeremy Heron - Finance & Corporate</p> <p>Councillor Dan Poole – Community Safety & Wellbeing</p>
Strategic Director(s)	Alan Bethune – Strategic Director Corporate Resources & Transformation (Section 151 Officer)
Officer Contact	<p>Paul Whittles</p> <p>Assistant Director - Finance</p> <p>02380 285766</p> <p>paul.whittles@nfdc.gov.uk</p>

Introduction and background

1. The Council entered into an agreement in July 2021 for Freedom Leisure to manage and operate the Council's five leisure facilities at Applemore, Lymington, New Milton, Ringwood, and Totton.
2. As part of this contract Freedom Leisure has the ability to make most operational and business decisions. However, there are a number of contractual clauses which require additional approval by the Council for specific changes.
3. Freedom Leisure's latest annual report as presented to the Housing & Communities overview and scrutiny panel in September can be found here [New Forest Leisure Partnership Annual Report](#).
4. Appendix 1 provided by Freedom Leisure sets out the case for their fee proposals and includes the schedule of proposed fees for consideration of the Cabinet and ultimately approval by Council.

Leisure Fees and Charges

5. The Council's Leisure partner, Freedom Leisure, sets fees in line with the contractual agreement. As part of this any increases greater than the Consumer Price Index (CPI) require Council approval.
6. Due to cost pressures particularly associated with pay and energy, an increase in fees greater than CPI has been proposed by Freedom Leisure as detailed in Appendix 1 and form part of this paper's recommendations. It is the responsibility of Freedom Leisure as the Council's operator to respond to external factors and set a pricing strategy that seeks to maximise their income, whilst continuing to support long-standing concessions previously offered by the Council.
7. This price increase will have a neutral impact on the Council's financial position, but by the Council supporting appropriate price increases to maintain a healthy viable business model, its Medium Term financial interests are protected.

Corporate plan priorities

8. Having high quality, well-funded, leisure services underpinned by strong, successful partnership working relationships supports the corporate objective of empowering residents to live healthy, connected and fulfilling lives.
9. Supporting the Council's partners' financial sustainability ensures the Council are being financially responsible by protecting the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan from any unplanned impact.

Options appraisal

10. The Council could choose to not to approve the proposed fee increases which would lead to a funding shortfall within the Freedom Leisure budget necessitating the need to potentially cut back services, staffing levels or opening hours to enable the business to operate within the constraints their funding allows.
11. In the worst-case scenario (albeit highly unlikely at this time), Freedom Leisure may need to withdraw from the contract altogether, effectively handing back leisure operations to the Council with all the financial and operational issues associated with it, including the additional costs and challenges currently being faced by the operator.

Consultation undertaken

12. Internal consultation between finance officers, budget holders, partners and the portfolio holder has informed the contents of the report.

Financial and resource implications

13. All financial and resource implications are contained within the body of the report.

Legal implications

14. Where Freedom Leisure seek to increase specific prices above CPI the contract provides that this first requires Council approval before such increases can be implemented. As the proposed price increases are above CPI, they need to be considered by the Council which has the decision as to whether to approve. These charges are the ones set out in Appendix 1.
15. In addition, some increases are limited by the contract to an increase in line with CPI and no further. These charges can be made without Council approval however consultation with the Council is required. These are the charges set out in Appendix 1 and although Council does not have the final decision on this element it is entitled to provide comments which should be taken into account by Freedom Leisure.

Risk assessment

16. None at this stage, although the options appraisal section highlights some risks that could crystallise, should the recommendation not be approved.

Environmental / Climate and nature implications

17. None at this stage, although it is worthy to note that the Council's Medium-Term Financial Planning will need to seek to support the delivery of the Council's Climate and Nature Action Plan.

Equalities implications

18. Considered as part of Appendix 1.

Crime and disorder implications

19. There are no direct implications regarding crime and disorder as a result of this report.

Data protection / Information governance / ICT implications

20. There are no direct implications regarding data protection, information governance or ICT as a result of this report.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Freedom Leisure Fees and Charges Proposal

Background Papers:

[New Forest Leisure Partnership Annual Report](#)



Fees & Charges proposal

Pricing From:

Core pricing: Price Increase from February 2025 to 31st December 2025



Background

As we approach the end of 2024, we would like to begin preparations for the annual review of fees and charges, with all core pricing from February 2025.

Historically, our approach has been to review the contractual pricing terms and adjust fees based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI) percentage, as outlined in the agreement. However, in recent years, we have adopted a more flexible approach to pricing to better account for macroeconomic conditions, particularly the significant rise in energy and workforce costs.

We have been actively engaged in discussions with you to ensure that customer pricing reflects the inflationary pressures and market forces that are beyond our control. This departure from the traditional pricing model allows us to respond more effectively to changing circumstances.

To maintain this transparency, we will continue to highlight any exceptional macroeconomic pressures that may impact our operations and pricing.

Increased People Costs

We are a people-led organisation. Our purpose to improve lives through leisure is predicated on our colleagues supporting local communities to improve their physical, mental and social wellbeing. We invest heavily in our workforce, employing over 400 people; our people costs are our single biggest cost, representing over 55% of our cost base. Despite the current low CPI inflation rate of 1.7% in November, high wage growth continues above 5% (Fig. 1) and has been as high as 8% in the last year - which more accurately reflects our internal increased people costs we have absorbed. With a further projected 6.7% increase for over 21s, 16.3% for 18-20-year Olds and 18% for 16-17-year olds, in National Living Wage in April 2025 (Fig. 2), and a forecast 3% increase due to the recent budget announcement to increase National Insurance, we need to reflect our rising cost base in customer pricing.

Figure 1: Wage Growth Jan 2023 – July 2023 Source ONS

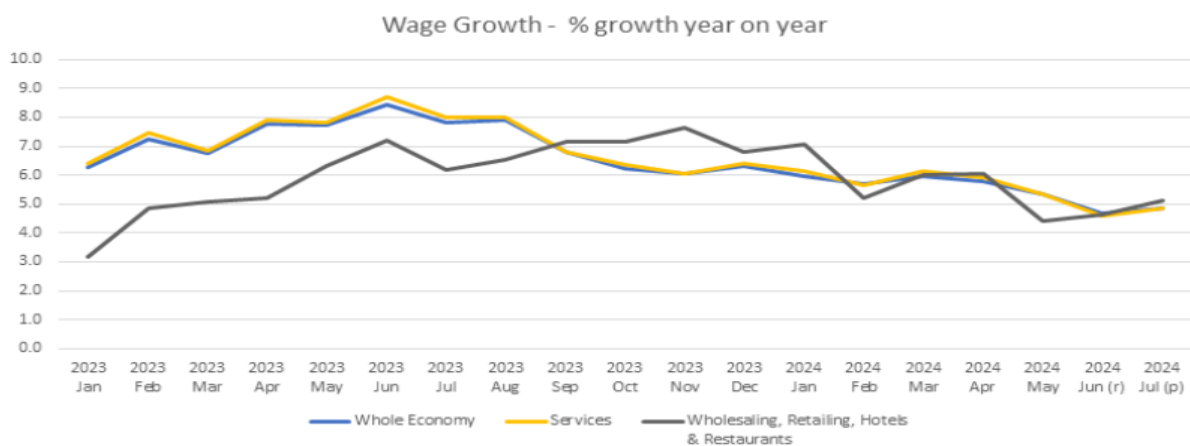
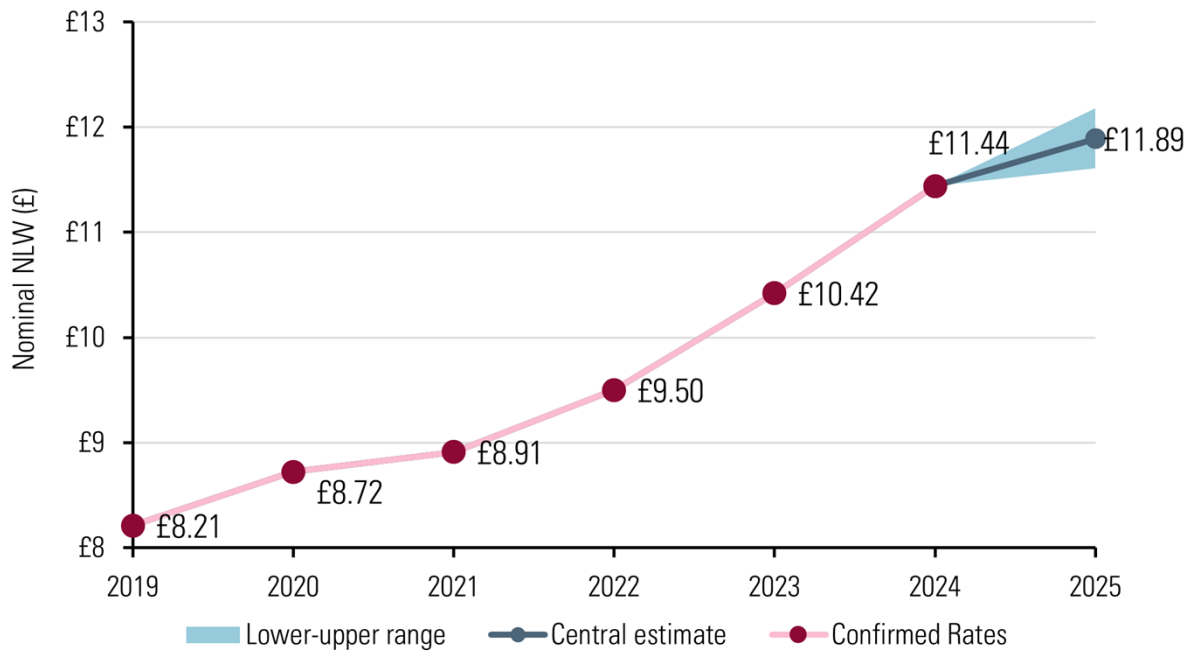


Figure 2: Actual and projected National Living Wage rates, 2019-2025



Increased Energy Costs

The second largest cost item we face are energy costs, and whilst we have worked hard in recent years to significantly reduce our energy consumption, we must continue to acknowledge that due to much higher market rates, our energy costs have more than doubled in recent years, with energy costs now representing nearly 15% of our overall cost base.

Pricing Approach

Based on the above factors, and in spite of continued efforts exploring new income streams and cost saving measures, the current contractual annual CPI% pricing approach will not mitigate against the cost pressures.

There is a strong case present for above-contractual increases due to the significant wage inflation pressures on our people-led services leading to a deterioration in current customer service and experience levels. Following will be a templated document that outlines our fees & charges increase proposal.

Equality Impact: We will offer a full concessionary program providing equality, diversity and cohesion.

We will continue to offer the current concessionary rates as set out below:

Leisure Centres	
Eligibility Criteria	<p><u>Advance 25 - up to 25 % reduction on fees and charges (Memberships and Pay as you go)</u></p> <p>Juniors (under 18), Individuals in receipt of State Pension, Full-Time Students.</p> <p>Teen Active and Senior Active.</p> <p>Senior Membership.</p> <p>Concessionary.</p> <p>Under 25's on the following: Modern Apprenticeships, NVQ Training Schemes and Life Skills Training.</p> <p>Corporate Membership.</p> <hr/> <p><u>Advance 50 - up to 50 % reduction on fees and charges (Pay as you go only)</u></p> <p>Carer's Allowance, Child Tax Credit, Council Tax Benefit (not discount schemes), Employment & Support Allowance, Foster Carers and Children, Housing Benefit, Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance, Pension Guaranteed Credits, Working Tax Credit, kindship carers, care leavers, looked after children and independent looked after children.</p>

- Lymington Health & Leisure
- New Milton Health & Leisure
- Applemore Health & Leisure
- Ringwood Health & Leisure
- Totton Health & Leisure

The negative impacts if FL New Forest were unsuccessful with the price rises application

- Employment would be reduced causing an impact to the Teams social value
- Current customer service and experience levels
- Forward membership growth and retention plan
- Capital Projects and investment
- Joint projects with the partners (School)
- Retention plans to introduce reward schemes (creating more motivation around members staying with us)
- Reduced time table and programme across all sites in group exercise, swimming and LTS.
- Our Gym experience enhancement aimed
- Impact to social value and our delivery of Healthy Communities programs
- Environmental Net Zero strategy and current plans may not be delivered
- Repair and maintenance work not completed
- Our New Forest wider Brand reputation would be harmed moving forward
- Current recovery deficit - surplus
- Impact on the health and wellbeing of the New Forest population
- Impact on the organization's actions in the community and environment
- Impact on the health and wellbeing of the New Forest diverse population

Core Pricing – Increase effective February 2025

- Average % increase across all Direct Debit Memberships is 6.1%.
- The highest monthly % increase is student DD, which is an increase of £3.50.
- The lowest increase is the corporate membership 3.1%, which is an increase of £1.40.

Fitness Direct	Current Price	Proposed Price	Price Variance	Price Variance
	£	£	£	%
Single Peak DD	£56.00	£58.00	£2.00	3.6%
Senior DD	£44.00	£47.00	£3.00	6.8%
Off Peak DD NLS	£44.00	£45.00	£1.00	2.3%
Family Peak DD NLS	£117.40	£117.40	£0.00	0.0%
Student DD	£35.00	£38.50	£3.50	10.0%
Concessionary DD	£44.00	£47.00	£3.00	6.8%
Single Corporate DD	£45.00	£46.40	£1.40	3.1%
Single NFDC Corporate DD	£33.00	£35.00	£2.00	6.1%
Funded 3M Student	£105.00	£120.00	£15.00	14.3%
Swim Direct				
Swim DD	£37.00	£40.00	£3.00	8.1%
Swim DD 65yrs+	£30.00	£32.00	£2.00	6.7%
Gym Direct Ringwood				
Gym DD RHL NLS	£45.00	£47.00	£2.00	4.4%
Gym Direct Totton				
Gym DD THL NLS	£45.00	£47.00	£2.00	4.4%
Gym Direct				
Gym DD	£45.00	£48.00	£3.00	6.7%

Annual Membership

The below annual membership prices are the cost of 11 single payments of the above monthly direct debit membership price.

Fitness Direct	Current Price	Proposed Price	Price Variance	Price Variance
	£	£	£	%
Single Peak Annual	£616.00	£638.00	£22.00	3.6%
Senior Annual	£484.00	£517.00	£33.00	6.8%
Student Annual	£385.00	£423.50	£38.50	10.0%
Concessionary Annual	£484.00	£517.00	£33.00	6.8%
Single Corporate Annual	£495.00	£510.40	£15.40	3.1%
Single NFDC Corporate Annual	£363.00	£385.00	£22.00	6.1%
Swim Direct				
Swim Annual	£407.00	£440.00	£33.00	8.1%
Swim Annual 65yrs+	£330.00	£352.00	£22.00	6.7%
Gym Direct				
Gym Annual	£495.00	£528.00	£33.00	6.7%

Swimming Activities

- Average % increase across all Swimming Activities is 7.2%.
- The highest % increase is concessionary junior swim at 8.3%, which is an increase of £0.25.
- The lowest percentage increase is the member junior swim at 7.1% which is an increase of £0.25.

	Price Product	Current Price £	Proposed Price £	Price Variance £	Price Variance %
Public Swim	Senior Active	£4.00	£4.30	£0.30	7.5%
	Concessionary Adt	£4.00	£4.30	£0.30	7.5%
	Concessionary Jnr	£3.00	£3.25	£0.25	8.3%
	Member Adt	£7.00	£7.50	£0.50	7.1%
	Member Jnr	£3.50	£3.75	£0.25	7.1%
	N/member Adt	£7.00	£7.50	£0.50	7.1%
	N/member Jnr	£4.20	£4.50	£0.30	7.1%
	Special	£5.00	£5.40	£0.40	8.0%
	Standard	£7.00	£7.50	£0.50	7.1%
Public Swim 3-7yrs	Standard	£2.00	£2.00	£0.00	0.0%
Public Swim 65yrs+	Senior Active	£4.00	£4.30	£0.30	7.5%
	Concessionary Adt	£4.00	£4.30	£0.30	7.5%
	Member Adt	£5.00	£5.40	£0.40	8.0%
	N/member Adt	£5.00	£5.40	£0.40	8.0%
	Special	£5.00	£5.40	£0.40	8.0%
	Standard	£5.00	£5.40	£0.40	8.0%
Public Swim Family	Standard	£17.00	£18.35	£1.35	7.9%
Fun Swim	Senior Active	£7.00	£7.50	£0.50	7.1%
Holiday Fun Swim	Concessionary Adt	£7.00	£7.50	£0.50	7.1%
	Concessionary Jnr	£4.20	£4.50	£0.30	7.1%
	Member Adt	£7.00	£7.50	£0.50	7.1%
	Member Jnr	£4.20	£4.50	£0.30	7.1%
	N/member Adt	£6.00	£6.45	£0.45	7.5%
	N/member Jnr	£4.20	£4.50	£0.30	7.1%
	Special	£7.00	£7.50	£0.50	7.1%
	Standard	£7.00	£7.50	£0.50	7.1%
				£0.00	
Swim Training LHL	Standard	£9.70	£10.40	£0.70	7.2%
			£0.00		
Adult swim Lesson PAYG	Standard	£9.00	£9.65	£0.65	7.2%

Clubs & private hire

- Average % increase across all club and private hire in this section is 7.2%.
- Swimming lessons that are cancelled will be equal to the total membership base at the time of the event. The hirer will be charged to that value.
- The lifeguard hourly rate will be based on the national living wage as on costs, at the time of this event.

	Current Price £	Proposed Price £	Price Variance £	Price Variance %
Dance Studio-M	£22.40	£24.00	£1.60	7.14%
	£16.50	£17.75	£1.25	7.58%
GA Room-S	£17.50	£18.75	£1.25	7.14%
	£11.70	£12.51	£0.81	6.92%
Studio 2-S	£17.50	£18.75	£1.25	7.14%
	£11.70	£12.51	£0.81	6.92%
MBS-M	£22.40	£24.00	£1.60	7.14%
	£16.50	£17.75	£1.25	7.58%
Lymington				
Studio 1-L	£26.50	£28.40	£1.90	7.17%
	£18.50	£19.75	£1.25	6.76%
Studio 2-M	£22.40	£24.00	£1.60	7.14%
	£16.50	£17.75	£1.25	7.58%
New Milton				
Studio 1-L	£26.50	£28.40	£1.90	7.17%
	£18.50	£19.75	£1.25	6.76%
Studio 2-M	£22.40	£24.00	£1.60	7.14%
	£16.50	£17.75	£1.25	7.58%
Ringwood				
Studio -L	£26.50	£28.40	£1.90	7.17%
	£18.50	£19.75	£1.25	6.76%
Studio 2-S	£22.40	£24.00	£1.60	7.14%
	£16.50	£17.75	£1.25	7.58%

Unsupervised Activities (Badminton, Main hall, fitness suite etc)

- Average % increase across all Unsupervised Activities is 7.6%.
- The highest % increase is holiday courtx2 court hire 8.00%, which is an increase of £0.60.
- The lowest percentage increase is a Badminton Court 7.41%, which is an increase of £0.65.

	Price Product	Current Price £	Proposed Price £	Price Variance £	Price Variance %
Induction 60 mins	Member Adt	£17.50	£18.85	£1.35	7.71%
	N/member Adt	£17.50	£18.85	£1.35	7.71%
	N/member Jnr	£17.50	£18.85	£1.35	7.71%
	Standard	£17.50	£18.85	£1.35	7.71%
	All	£17.50	£18.85	£1.35	7.71%
Gym review 30 mins	Member Adt	£9.25	£9.95	£0.70	7.57%
	N/member Adt	£9.25	£9.95	£0.70	7.57%
	N/member Jnr	£4.75	£5.10	£0.35	7.37%
	Standard	£9.25	£9.95	£0.70	7.57%
Body stat	Senior Active	£11.00	£11.85	£0.85	7.73%
	Member Adt	£14.50	£15.60	£1.10	7.59%
	Member Jnr	£11.00	£11.85	£0.85	7.73%
	N/member Adt	£14.50	£15.60	£1.10	7.59%
	N/member Jnr	£14.50	£15.60	£1.10	7.59%
	Special	£14.50	£15.60	£1.10	7.59%
	Standard	£14.50	£15.60	£1.10	7.59%
Gym session	Senior Active	£4.40	£4.75	£0.35	7.95%
	Member Adt	£9.25	£9.95	£0.70	7.57%
	Member Jnr	£2.90	£3.10	£0.20	6.90%
	N/member Adt	£9.25	£9.95	£0.70	7.57%
	N/member Jnr	£5.00	£5.35	£0.35	7.00%
	Standard	£9.25	£9.95	£0.70	7.57%

	Current Price £	Proposed Price £	Price Variance £	Price Variance %
Badminton	£12.00	£12.90	£0.90	7.50%
	£8.80	£9.45	£0.65	7.41%
	£8.40	£9.05	£0.65	7.74%
	£6.50	£7.00	£0.50	7.69%
Holiday court	£4.25	£4.55	£0.30	7.06%
Basketball				
4 Courts AHL	£60.00	£64.50	£4.50	7.50%
	£36.50	£39.25	£2.75	7.53%
2 Courts AHL	£23.50	£25.25	£1.75	7.45%
	£17.50	£18.75	£1.25	7.14%
1 Court RHL	£12.00	£12.90	£0.90	7.50%
	£8.80	£9.45	£0.65	7.41%
	£8.40	£9.05	£0.65	7.74%
	£6.50	£7.00	£0.50	7.69%
Whole Hall RHL	£60.00	£64.50	£4.50	7.50%
	£36.50	£39.25	£2.75	7.53%
2 Courts RHL	£23.50	£25.25	£1.75	7.45%
	£17.50	£18.80	£1.30	7.43%
4 Courts THL	£60.00	£64.50	£4.50	7.50%
	£36.50	£39.25	£2.75	7.53%
2 Courts THL	£23.50	£25.25	£1.75	7.45%
	£17.50	£18.80	£1.30	7.43%
Holiday Courts x2	£7.50	£8.10	£0.60	8.00%

	Current Price £	Proposed Price £	Price Variance £	Price Variance %
5 a side Football				
4 Courts AHL	£60.00	£64.50	£4.50	7.50%
	£36.50	£39.25	£2.75	7.53%
2 Courts NMHL	£23.50	£25.25	£1.75	7.45%
	£17.50	£18.80	£1.30	7.43%
Whole Hall NMHL	£60.00	£64.50	£4.50	7.50%
	£36.50	£39.25	£2.75	7.53%
Whole Hall RHL	£60.00	£64.50	£4.50	7.50%
	£36.40	£39.25	£2.85	7.83%
Softplay Areas (RHL)				
U2yrs	£3.50	£3.75	£0.25	7.14%
2yrs+	£4.40	£4.75	£0.35	7.95%
Table Tennis	£7.00	£7.55	£0.55	7.86%
Tennis Court (Carvers) RHL-Unlit	£7.50	£8.10	£0.60	8.00%
	£7.00	£7.55	£0.55	7.86%
Tennis Court (Carvers) RHL-Lit	£9.70	£10.45	£0.75	7.73%
	£9.00	£9.70	£0.70	7.78%
Unclubbables AHL	£6.40	£6.90	£0.50	7.81%
	£7.00	£7.55	£0.55	7.86%
	£7.50	£8.05	£0.55	7.33%
Adult Open Badminton MNHL	£6.40	£6.90	£0.50	7.81%
	£7.40	£7.95	£0.55	7.43%
Holiday Mega/Bounce/Tramp/Gym	£4.20	£4.50	£0.30	7.14%

Supervised activities (includes Active Lifestyles request not above October CPI)

- Average % increase across all Supervised Activities is 7.6%.
- The highest % increase is 17.6 % Sauna Steam and Swim AHL (Member, None Member, Special and Standard)
- The lowest percentage increase is 1.51% Active Lifestyles activity morning, which is an **increase of £0.04**.

	Current Price £	Proposed Price £	Price Variance £	Price Variance %
PAYG Memberships				
Teen Active	£39.00	£45.00	£6.00	15.38%
Senior Active	£39.00	£45.00	£6.00	15.38%

Course Direct	Current Price £	Proposed Price £	Price Variance £	Price Variance %
Applemore				
Course DD 40-60min	£26.00	£28.00	£2.00	7.69%
Course Annual 40-60min	£260.00	£280.00	£20.00	7.69%
Lymington			£0.00	
Course DD 40-60min	£26.00	£28.00	£2.00	7.69%
Course Annual 40-60min	£260.00	£280.00	£20.00	7.69%
New Milton			£0.00	
Course DD 40-60min	£26.00	£28.00	£2.00	7.69%
Course Annual 40-60min	£260.00	£280.00	£20.00	7.69%
Course DD 75-90min	£32.00	£35.20	£3.20	10.00%
Course Annual 75-90min	£315.00	£346.00	£31.00	9.84%
Ringwood			£0.00	
Course DD 40-60min	£26.00	£28.00	£2.00	7.69%
Course Annual 40-60min	£260.00	£280.00	£20.00	7.69%
Totton			£0.00	
Course DD 40-60min	£26.00	£28.00	£2.00	7.69%
Course Annual 40-60min	£260.00	£280.00	£20.00	7.69%
Course DD 75-90min	£32.00	£35.20	£3.20	10.00%
Course Annual 75-90min	£315.00	£346.00	£31.00	9.84%

Group Fitness	Price Product	Current Price £	Proposed Price £	Price Variance £	Price Variance %
No show Charge		£3.00	£3.00	£0.00	0%
				£0.00	
30 minute class	Senior Active	£4.35	£4.80	£0.45	10.34%
	Concessionary Adt	£4.35	£4.80	£0.45	10.34%
	Concessionary Jnr	£2.70	£2.95	£0.25	9.26%
	Member Adt	£5.70	£6.25	£0.55	9.65%
	Member Jnr	£2.70	£2.95	£0.25	9.26%
	N/member Adt	£5.70	£6.25	£0.55	9.65%
	N/member Jnr	£5.70	£6.25	£0.55	9.65%
	Special	£4.40	£4.85	£0.45	10.23%
	Standard	£5.70	£6.25	£0.55	9.65%
				£0.00	
45 minute class	Senior Active	£4.35	£4.80	£0.45	10.34%
	Concessionary Adt	£4.35	£4.80	£0.45	10.34%
	Concessionary Jnr	£2.70	£2.95	£0.25	9.26%
	Member Adt	£6.90	£7.60	£0.70	10.14%
	Member Jnr	£2.70	£2.95	£0.25	9.26%
	N/member Adt	£6.90	£7.60	£0.70	10.14%
	N/member Jnr	£6.90	£7.60	£0.70	10.14%
	Special	£4.40	£4.85	£0.45	10.23%
	Standard	£6.90	£7.60	£0.70	10.14%
				£0.00	
60 Minute Class	Senior Active	£4.40	£4.85	£0.45	10.23%
	Concessionary Adt	£4.40	£4.85	£0.45	10.23%
	Concessionary Jnr	£2.70	£2.95	£0.25	9.26%
	Member Adt	£8.70	£9.60	£0.90	10.34%
	Member Jnr	£2.70	£2.95	£0.25	9.26%
	N/member Adt	£8.70	£9.60	£0.90	10.34%
	N/member Jnr	£8.70	£9.60	£0.90	10.34%
	Special	£4.40	£4.85	£0.45	10.23%
	Standard	£8.80	£9.70	£0.90	10.23%

Active Lifestyles	Current Price £	Proposed Price £	Price Variance £	Price Variance %
A/L Package 12 week Package	£85.00	£86.45	£1.45	1.71%
A/L Escape Pain 6 week Package	£42.50	£43.20	£0.70	1.65%
A/L First assesment	£11.90	£12.10	£0.20	1.68%
A/L Mid assesment				
A/L Final assesment				
A/L Programme				
A/L Gym Session	£4.25	£4.32	£0.07	1.65%
A/L Cadiac circuits				
A/L Review				
A/L Class	£9.00	£9.15	£0.15	1.67%
A/L activity morning	£2.65	£2.69	£0.04	1.51%
	£9.00	£9.15	£0.15	1.67%
	£4.80	£4.88	£0.08	1.67%
A/L Supervision	£4.25	£4.32	£0.07	1.65%
A/L Course	£3.70	£3.76	£0.06	1.62%
A/L Escape Pain Course	£42.50	£43.22	£0.72	1.69%
A/L Parkinson class				
A/L Steady & Strong class	£4.25	£4.32	£0.07	1.65%
A/L First Assesment Cardiac	£11.90	£12.10	£0.20	1.68%
A/L First Assesment COPD	£11.90	£12.10	£0.20	1.68%
A/L First Assessment Escape Pain	£11.90	£12.10	£0.20	1.68%
A/L Graduate Package (3 Months, Price per month)	£37.00	£37.63	£0.63	1.70%
A/L Group First Assessment	£4.80	£4.88	£0.08	1.67%

	Price Product	Current Price £	Proposed Price £	Price Variance £	Price Variance %
Sauna steam and swim AHL	Senior Active	£5.00	£5.50	£0.50	10.0%
Out Side Core Products	Concessionary Adt	£5.00	£5.50	£0.50	10.0%
	Member Adt	£8.50	£10.00	£1.50	17.6%
	N/member Adt	£8.50	£10.00	£1.50	17.6%
	Special	£8.50	£10.00	£1.50	17.6%
	Standard	£8.50	£10.00	£1.50	17.6%

Personal Training	Current Price £	Proposed Price £	Price Variance £	Price Variance %
PT 1:1 Session 60min	£42.50	£46.75	£4.25	10%
			£0.00	
PT 1:1 Six Session	£230.00	£247.00	£17.00	7%
			£0.00	
PT 2:1 Session 60min	£47.50	£52.25	£4.75	10%
			£0.00	
PT 1:2 Six Session	£250.00	£269.00	£19.00	8%
			£0.00	
PT 1:1 session 30min	£23.00	£24.75	£1.75	8%

Training	Current Price £	Proposed Price £	Price Variance £	Price Variance %
NPLQ full course	£299.00	£299.00	£0.00	0.00%
NPLQ Exam retest				
Swim Teaching Course	£480.00	£515.00	£35.00	7.29%
STA Pool Safety Award	£99.00	£106.25	£7.25	7.32%
First Aid at Work	£225.00	£242.00	£17.00	7.56%
FAW Renewal	£150.00	£161.00	£11.00	7.33%
Emergency First Aid (at work)	£95.00	£102.00	£7.00	7.37%
First Aid Bolt On	£59.00	£63.50	£4.50	7.63%

Children's parties

- Exclusive 1 Hour session.
- 60 Minute use of a studio for cake at an additional charge.
- Food is provided at an additional charge.

	Current Price £	Proposed Price £	Price Variance £	Price Variance %
Applemore				
Bounce and Play with catering	£259.00	£278.00	£19.00	7.34%
Fun Time Pool with catering	£259.00	£278.00	£19.00	7.34%
Soft Play with catering	£259.00	£278.00	£19.00	7.34%
Aqua run with catering	£259.00	£278.00	£19.00	7.34%
Lymington				
Bounce and Soft play	£119.00	£128.00	£9.00	7.56%
Learner pool Party	£99.00	£106.25	£7.25	7.32%
Fun Time Pool Party	£119.00	£128.00	£9.00	7.56%
BYO Party Room Hire	£30.00	£32.25	£2.25	7.51%
New Milton				
Bounce and Soft play	£119.00	£128.00	£9.00	7.56%
Fun Time Pool Party	£119.00	£128.00	£9.00	7.56%
BYO Party Room Hire	£30.00	£32.25	£2.25	7.50%
Aqua run			£0.00	
Ringwood				
Bounce and Play with catering	£259.00	£278.00	£19.00	7.34%
Fun Time Pool with catering	£259.00	£278.00	£19.00	7.34%
Soft Play with catering	£259.00	£278.00	£19.00	7.34%
Totton				
Bounce Party BYO	£119.00	£128.00	£9.00	7.56%
Bounce and play	£119.00	£128.00	£9.00	7.56%
Learner pool Party	£99.00	£106.25	£7.25	7.32%
Fun Time Pool Party	£119.00	£128.00	£9.00	7.56%
BYO Party Room Hire	£30.00	£32.25	£2.25	7.50%

All weather pitch (AWP)

- Average % increase across all AWP is 7.6%.
- The highest % individual court hire at 8.03%, which is an increase of £3.20.
- The lowest increase is court junior rate 6.38%, which is an increase of £1.50

Major Event Competitions will remain as negotiated between the operator and the hirer.

	Current Price £	Proposed Price £	Price Variance £	Price Variance %
ATP				
1/3 ATP	£39.80	£43.00	£3.20	8.03%
	£23.50	£25.25	£1.75	7.45%
Whole ATP	£92.75	£99.50	£6.75	7.28%
ATP Court RHL	£39.80	£43.00	£3.20	8.03%
	£23.50	£25.25	£1.75	7.45%
ATP Court JNR Special RHL	£23.50	£25.00	£1.50	6.38%
Holiday Court	£14.10	£15.15	£1.05	7.46%

Colleague Memberships

A colleague membership is available to all Freedom Leisure Employees, providing employees with access to our gyms, group exercise classes and swimming pools. Employees also benefit from discounts of 50% for swimming lessons which include family members.

Benefits	Colleague	Additional Person (16 yrs +)	Additional Child (Under 16 yrs)
	Gold Card	Silver Card	Bronze Card
Who Qualifies	Colleague	Partner / Family Member	Family Member*
Price	£5	£10	FREE
Gym	✓	✓	✓ **
Classes	✓	✓	✓ **
Swim	✓	✓	✓
Family Swimming / Soft Play	✓	✓	✓
Off-Peak Courts	✓	✓	✓
Swimming Lessons	50% off	50% off	50% off
Holiday Activities	50% off	50% off	50% off
Events	50% off	50% off	50% off
Access to F&B discounts	✓	N/A	N/A
Group Wide Access	✓	✓	✓
Bolt On: Class Booking Rights	Add £10 per month	Add £10 per month	N/A

Appendix A – Competitor Analysis

Memberships – Competitor Analysis

- **Pure Gym** - £23.99 first month then £31.99 a month plus £10 joining fee. Included in the membership – Gym and Classes with 14 days advance booking
- **The Gym Group** - £21.99 with a £5 join fee included in the membership – Gym & classes
- **Anytime Fitness** - £35.99 a month – Gym & Classes
- **David Lloyd** - £94.50 a month Included in the membership – Gym, Classes, Swimming and racket sports.
- **Gang Warily** (independent) - £45.00 a month included in the membership - Gym & Classes
- **Hills Gym** (independent) - £59.99 a month included in the membership – Gym and on demand home work out videos. Group fitness classes and personal training sessions extra.
- **Shorefield (Milford on Sea)** (independent) - £49.00 a month included in the membership – Gym, classes, swimming and multi court use.

Cabinet – 4 December 2024

Half Yearly Update Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report

Purpose	For Review
Classification	Public
Executive Summary	<p>The Council must comply with increased self-assessment, reporting and compliance and scrutiny requirements in relation to its complaints handling and performance as set out in the Housing Ombudsman’s statutory Complaint Handling Code and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman’s non-statutory Complaint Handling Code.</p> <p>To meet these requirements, the Council now produces an annual complaints performance and service improvement report for each financial year, which must be approved by Cabinet, as the Council’s governing body, and submitted to the Housing Ombudsman by 30 June each year.</p> <p>The Council has also chosen to prepare a half yearly update to provide the Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel and Cabinet with an overview of complaint handling following the end of the first half of each financial year.</p> <p>This report includes the half yearly update for the period 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024 which was scrutinised by the Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel (with members of the Housing and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel invited) on 21 November 2024.</p>
Recommendations	That Cabinet note the half yearly update.

Reasons for recommendation	The half yearly update on complaints has been introduced to meet increased scrutiny requirements, as set out in the complaint handling codes, ensuring both overview and scrutiny panels and Cabinet, as the governing body, receive regular updates on complaint handling.
Wards	All
Portfolio Holders	Councillor Jeremy Heron – Finance and Corporate Councillor Steve Davies - Housing and Homelessness
Strategic Directors	Alan Bethune – Strategic Director Corporate Resources & Transformation
Officer Contact	Amanda Wilson Information Governance and Complaints Manager 02380 285306 amanda.wilson@nfdc.gov.uk

Introduction and background

1. The purpose of this report is to provide members with a half yearly update complaints performance and service improvement report to cover the period 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024 (**Appendix 1**).
2. This report also outlines some of the key changes to member scrutiny of complaints following two new Complaint Handling Codes from both the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman and the Housing Ombudsman taking effect.

Previous process for member scrutiny of complaints

3. Officers previously provided the Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel with the Council’s annual complaints report at its November meeting for the preceding financial year. This annual report included an overview of complaints received, and dealt with, by the Council’s Information Governance and Complaints Team during the relevant financial year. It also covered complaints where either the Local Government and Social Care or the Housing Ombudsman had been involved and some comparisons with previous years were included. This report also included some

examples of the compliments and positive feedback that had been received by officers during the relevant time.

4. This report also provided members with the Council's self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code which was in place previously.

New Complaint Handling Codes

5. There are two Ombudsmen with jurisdiction over the Council. The Housing Ombudsman for complaints from the Council's tenants relating to the Council in its capacity as their landlord and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman with jurisdiction over all other complaints.
6. In July 2020 the Housing Ombudsman published a Complaints Handling Code. This code was introduced to provide a high-level framework to support landlords in handling housing related complaints. 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. The Council's previous self-assessments were against this Code.
7. In September 2023 both the Housing Ombudsman and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman launched a consultation on a Joint Complaint Handling Code ('the Joint Code'). The aim of the Joint Code was to put '*complaint handling at the heart of corporate governance in councils, requiring regular reporting of performance allowing for effective scrutiny of service delivery*'.
8. Following the outcome of the consultation it was concluded that it was not possible for the Joint Code to take effect due to the difference in the respective powers of each of the Ombudsman. In particular, the statutory power in accordance with the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 for the Housing Ombudsman to issue a statutory code of practice and the statutory duty for the Housing Ombudsman to monitor compliance with the code. The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman accordingly issued a separate non-statutory code which is aligned to the Housing Ombudsman's statutory code.
9. From 1 April 2024, both the statutory [Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code](#) and the non-statutory [Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code](#) took effect.

10. The Council's Corporate Complaints Procedure was largely compliant with the Codes, However, some amendments to the procedure were required which took effect on 1 April 2024.
11. The new Complaint Handling Codes include a requirement to produce an annual complaints performance and service improvement report for scrutiny and challenge which must include:
 - (a) the annual self-assessment against the Code to ensure the Council's complaint handling policy remains in line with its requirements;
 - (b) a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the Council's complaint handling performance. This must also include a summary of the types of complaints the Council has refused to accept;
 - (c) any findings of non-compliance with the Code by the Ombudsman;
 - (d) the service improvements made as a result of the learning from complaints;
 - (e) any annual report about the Council's performance from the Ombudsman;
 - (f) any other relevant reports or publications produced by the Ombudsman in relation to the work of the Council.
12. The Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code states that *'The annual complaints performance and service improvement report must be reported to the landlord's governing body (or equivalent) and published on the section of its website relating to complaints. The governing body's response to the report must be published alongside this.'* Guidance produced by the Housing Ombudsman provides that for a local authority, the governing body is Cabinet.
13. In addition, the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code includes the following requirements:

'1.70 '...a member of the governing body (or equivalent) must be appointed to have lead responsibility for complaints to support a positive complaint handling culture. This person is referred to as the Member Responsible for Complaints ('the MRC').

1.71 The MRC will be responsible for ensuring the governing body receives regular information on complaints that provides insight on the landlord's complaint handling performance. This person must have access to suitable information and staff to perform this role and report on their findings.

1.72 *As a minimum, the MRC, and the governing body (or equivalent) must receive:*

- (a) regular updates on the volume, categories, and outcomes of complaints, alongside complaint handling performance*
- (b) regular reviews of issues and trends arising from complaint handling*
- (c) regular updates on the outcomes of the Ombudsman's investigations and progress made in complying with orders related to severe maladministration findings*
- (d) the annual complaints performance and service improvement report'*

14. The guidance produced by the Housing Ombudsman provides that for a local authority, the MRC will be the portfolio holder with responsibility for Housing.
15. In addition, the Housing Ombudsman's guidance published on its website states that the self-assessment form, the annual complaints performance and service improvement report and the governing body's response should be submitted to the Housing Ombudsman by 30 June each year for the preceding financial year (in line with the submissions date for the Regulator of Social Housing's Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM)).
16. The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code, includes mostly equivalent provisions to those set out above. However, the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman is less prescriptive on who should hold the role of MRC. There is also no requirement for the self-assessment against the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's code nor the annual complaint performance and service improvement report to be submitted to them.

The Council's New Arrangements

17. To meet the new member scrutiny requirements, the following arrangements have been put in place:
 - There are two MRCs:
 - Housing and Homelessness Portfolio Holder – MRC - complaints under the jurisdiction of the Housing Ombudsman (and other Housing complaints).
 - Finance and Corporate Portfolio Holder – MRC - all other corporate complaints.

- The MRCs will be given regular updates on complaint handling through their Portfolio Holder Briefings.
- Cabinet, as the governing body, will also receive two reports per year on complaint handling to meet the obligations under the codes:
 - June - The annual complaints performance and service improvement report will be considered and the governing body's formal response will be approved, prior to being published and then submitted to the Housing Ombudsman by 30 June each year.
 - December – The half yearly update report.
- Overview and Scrutiny Panels:

It remains important that there is still general scrutiny of the Council's complaints handling process. The panels will receive two updates per year:

- November - Resources and Transformation Panel (Housing and Communities Panel members invited) – The half yearly update report.
- The arrangements for the scrutiny of the annual complaints performance and service improvement report prior to June Cabinet (and the 30 June submission date) are being reviewed due to the timings of scheduled meetings.

Annual Complaints Performance And Service Improvement Report For 2023/2024

18. The annual complaints performance and service improvement report 2023/24 took a different form to the Council's previous complaints reports to meet the enhanced requirements of the complaint handling codes. The report included reflective analysis on the 2023/24 financial year, as well as proposing actions with the aim of improving the Council's complaint handling going forward. The report also included compliments and positive feedback.
19. As a result of the timings of the newly issued codes taking effect on 1 April 2024, the 30 June 2024 submission date, and the Council's scheduled meeting timetables, it was not possible for full Cabinet to receive the annual complaints performance and service improvement report for 2023/24 before its submission.

20. The Housing Ombudsman confirmed that it was acceptable for this report to be approved by, and the response provided on behalf of Cabinet(as the governing body) by, the MRCs through a portfolio holder decision.
21. The [joint portfolio holder decision](#) was made on 13 June 2024. The submission to the Housing Ombudsman took place before the 30 June 2024 deadline and the documents are published on the Council's webpage: [Feedback, comments and complaints - New Forest District Council](#).

Half yearly update report

22. The half yearly update report is included at **Appendix 1**.
23. This report also includes a link to the published annual complaints performance and service improvement report 2023/24.

Corporate plan priorities

24. Our approach to complaint handling is in line with the Council's [Corporate Plan 2024 to 2028 for people, place and prosperity](#) and our values: LEAF:
 - Learning: we use complaints as an opportunity to learn from our mistakes.
 - Empathy: we show empathy to complainants.
 - Ambition: we have ambition to improve our services where it is identified that someone has not received the standard of service that they should have.
 - Fairness: we are fair to complainants and residents in our complaint handling.

Options appraisal

25. An alternative option would be for Cabinet to only receive one update each year on complaints. However, it is considered that bringing two updates is more in keeping with the requirements of the complaint handling codes.

Consultation undertaken

26. EMT has been consulted on this report.
27. The MRCs have also received an update on the information included within the report through their portfolio holder briefings.

28. This report and **Appendix 1** have been considered by the Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel (with members of the Housing and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel invited).

Financial and resource implications

29. There are none arising directly from this report.

Legal implications

30. The Council is subject to a legal requirement to comply with the Housing Ombudsman's statutory Complaint Handling Code.
31. The Council should also be complying with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's non-statutory Complaint Handling Code.

Risk assessment

32. A formal risk assessment is not deemed to be required.

Environmental / Climate and nature implications

33. There are none arising directly from this report.

Equalities implications

34. There are none arising directly from this report.

Crime and disorder implications

35. There are none arising directly from this report.

Data protection / Information governance / ICT implications

36. There are none arising directly from this report.

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Half yearly update complaints performance and service improvement report

Background Papers:

Published documents as referred to within report



Half Yearly Update Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report

1 April 2024 – 30 September 2024

Information Governance and Complaints Team

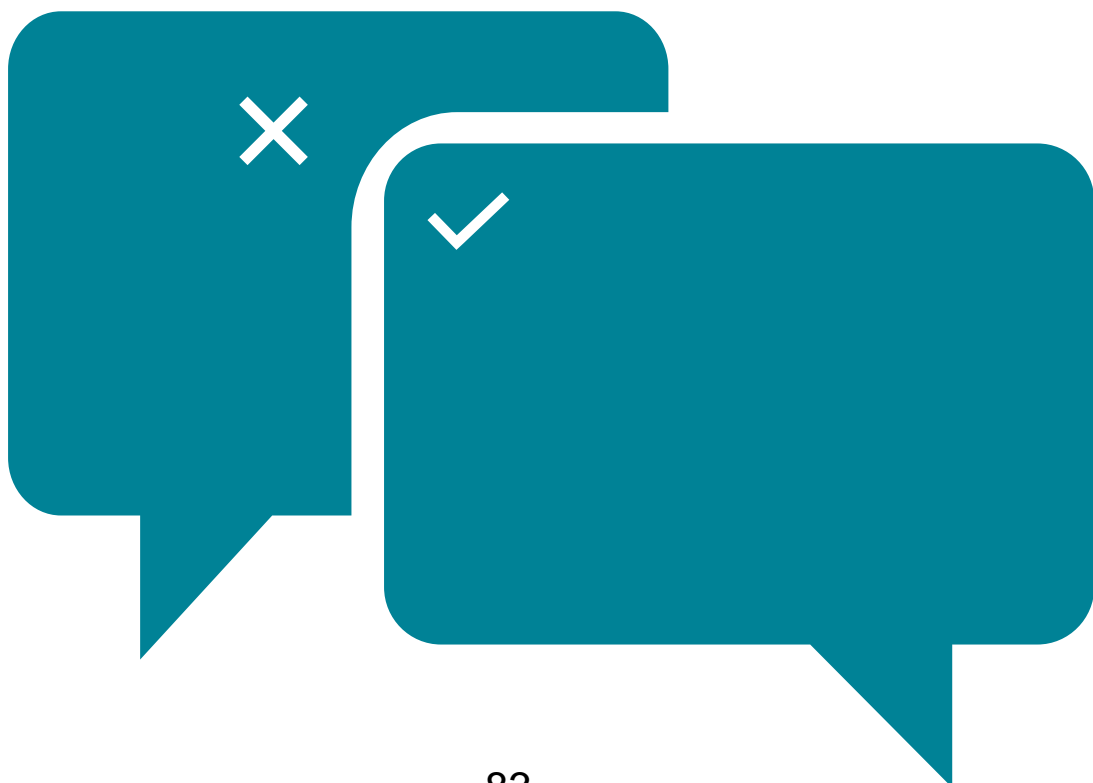


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1. Introduction

- 1.1 New Forest District Council ('the Council') is committed to providing residents, tenants and our communities with quality services. However, sometimes things do go wrong. We encourage people to tell us when this happens so we can put things right, explain what has happened, learn from our mistakes and improve our services.
- 1.2 We have a **Corporate Complaints Procedure** which we follow for complaints that are made to the Council. This process is managed by the Information Governance and Complaints Team.
- 1.3 Our approach to complaint handling is also in line with the Council's **Corporate Plan 2024 to 2028 for people, place and prosperity** and our values: LEAF:
- **Learning**: we use complaints as an opportunity to learn from our mistakes.
 - **Empathy**: we show empathy to complainants.
 - **Ambition**: we have ambition to improve our services where it is identified that someone has not received the standard of service that they should have.
 - **Fairness**: we are fair to complainants and residents in our complaint handling.
- 1.4 The purpose of this report is to provide a half yearly update on the complaints we have received during the period 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024, highlighting key themes, trends and volumes recognising that accountability and transparency are integral to a positive complaint handling culture.

2. Complaint Handling Codes

Background

- 2.1 There are two Ombudsman services with jurisdiction over our complaint handling: The Housing Ombudsman for complaints from our tenants relating to the Council in its capacity as their landlord, and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman with jurisdiction over all other complaints.
- 2.2 The Housing Ombudsman has a statutory power, in accordance with the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023, to issue a statutory code of practice and a statutory duty to monitor compliance with this code.
- 2.3 Accordingly, the Housing Ombudsman has issued a **statutory Complaint Handling Code**. The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman has also issued a **non-statutory Complaint Handling Code** which aligns closely with the Housing Ombudsman's code. Both codes took effect on 1 April 2024.

Self-Assessment

- 2.4 There is a requirement within both codes for us to carry out annual self-assessments to ensure our complaints procedure complies with the codes.
- 2.5 There is a further requirement in the Housing Ombudsman's code that this self-assessment is approved by our governing body (Cabinet), at least annually.
- 2.6 The self-assessments should also be published on the complaints section of our website. Our self-assessments against both codes are published here: **[Feedback, comments and complaints - New Forest District Council](#)**.

Annual complaints performance and service improvement report requirement

- 2.7 We must also produce an annual complaints performance and service improvement report for scrutiny and challenge.
- 2.8 The annual report prepared for the year 2023/2024 is published online, here: **Annual Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report 2023/24** ('the Annual Report').
- 2.9 The Annual Report was approved by the Members Responsible for Complaints ('MRCs'), acting on behalf of the Cabinet:
- Housing and Homelessness Portfolio Holder – Housing complaints
 - Finance and Corporate Portfolio Holder – All other complaints
- 2.10 The MRC's formal response to the Annual Report, on behalf of Cabinet, is published, here: **Feedback, comments and complaints - New Forest District Council**
- 2.11 In future years the annual complaints performance and service improvement report and Cabinet's response will be approved by full Cabinet.

Housing Ombudsman Submission

- 2.12 The Housing Ombudsman requires that we submit a copy of our self-assessment, annual complaints performance and service improvement report and Cabinet's response for the preceding financial year to it by 30 June each year.
- 2.13 The Annual Report for the year 2023/2024 was submitted in accordance with this deadline.

3. Our procedure

3.1 We currently operate a 2 stage **Corporate Complaints Procedure** for all complaints.

3.2 The process followed since 1 April 2024 is set out below:

Stage	Responsible Officer	Steps and Timescales
1	Service Manager (in consultation with Assistant Director/Strategic Director as applicable). The Assistant Director or Strategic Director may personally deal with a complaint at stage 1 at their discretion.	Complaint received. Complaint acknowledged within 5 working days by the Information Governance and Complaints Team. This acknowledgement will set out our understanding of the complaint and the outcome the complainant is seeking. Complainant informed of officer dealing with complaint and expected response date. Complainant requested to clarify complaint and desired outcome if this is not clear. Stage 1 response sent within 10 working days of the acknowledgement advising the complainant of the right to escalate the complaint by contacting the Information Governance and Complaints Team (complaints@nfdc.gov.uk). The response will also advise the complainant of their right to escalate their complaint to the relevant Ombudsman when they have exhausted this Procedure.
2	Monitoring Officer on behalf of the Chief Executive.	Request to escalate complaint received. Escalation request acknowledged within 5 working days by the Information Governance and Complaints Team. This acknowledgement will set out our understanding of the complaint and the outcome the complainant is seeking. Complainant informed of officer dealing with complaint and expected response date. Stage 2 response sent within 20 working days of the acknowledgement advising the complainant that they have completed this Procedure, and they are entitled to refer their complaint to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman or, for Housing Complaints (by Council tenants/ leaseholders about the Council as their landlord), the Housing Ombudsman if they remain dissatisfied.

3.3 These stages and timescales meet the requirements of the codes.

7

Half Yearly Update Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report | Information Governance and Complaints | 1.4.2024-30.9.2024

4. Structure

4.1 We recognise the importance of this report providing a clear half yearly update on all our complaint handling. As with the Annual Report, we have chosen to produce one report that covers all our service areas, which can be considered by our overview and scrutiny panels and Cabinet. We have structured the analysis sections of this report as follows:

- All complaints (section 5)
- Complaints from tenants to the Council as its landlord (section 6)
- Complaints not accepted (section 7)
- Learning (section 8)
- Ombudsman decisions (section 9)
- Compliments (section 10)
- Conclusion (section 11)

5. All complaints


Summary – 1 April 2024-30 September 2024

125 125 complaints received


Complaints received

42 42 / 125 complaints received relate to a single planning matter

Complaints relate to one issue

 The half year position shows complaints are increasing

 No Enforcement & Amenities complaints

 Increase in Waste and Transport complaints

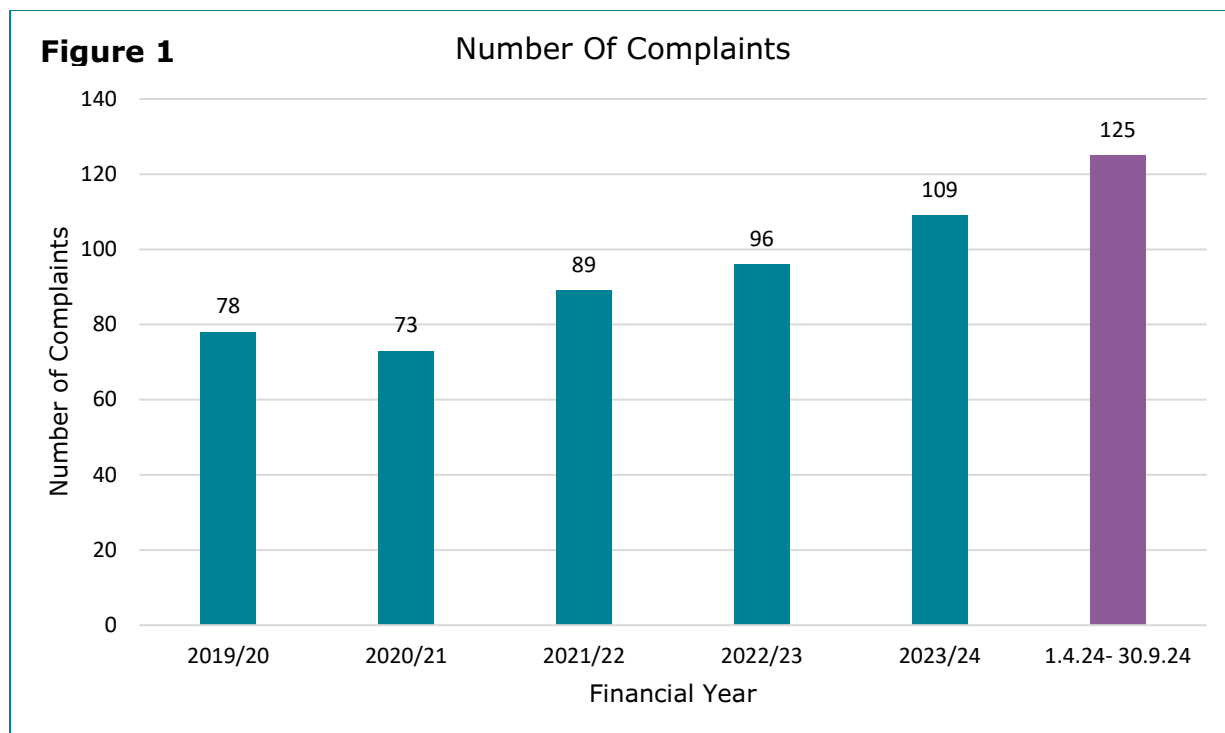
 Lower proportion of complaints upheld (41% compared to 53% for 2023/24)

 97% of stage 1 and 100% of stage 2 complaints responded to within procedure timescales

Analysis

Numbers

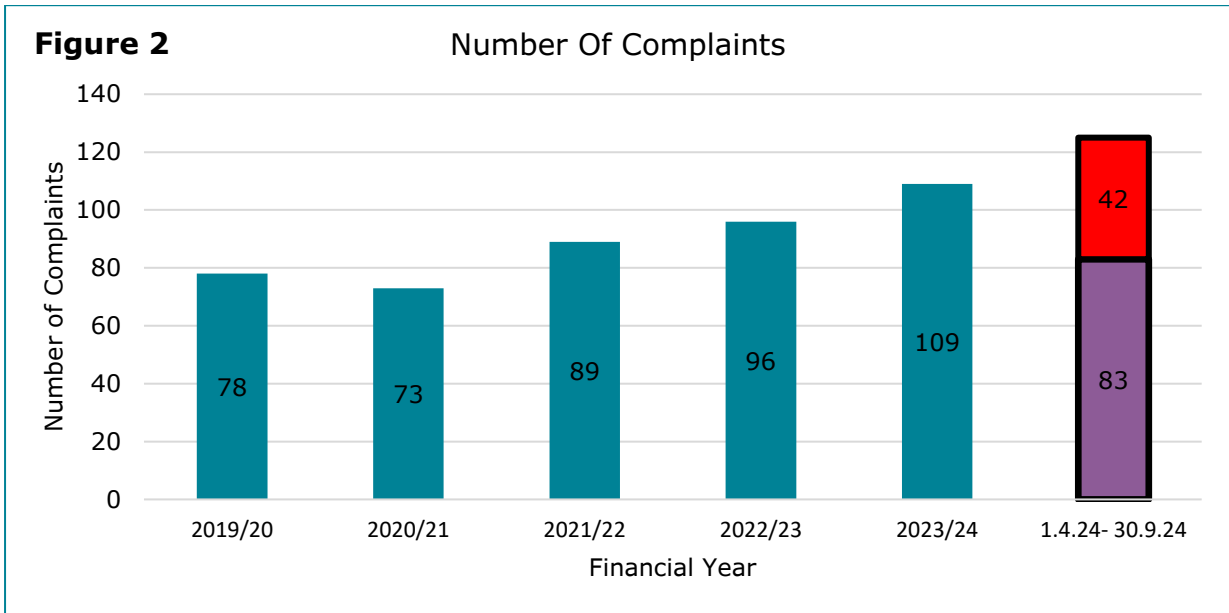
5.1 **Figure 1** below shows the total number of new complaints received by year with the half year position included in purple:



5.2 The half yearly total complaint figure currently exceeds the full year position for 2023/24. However, the Council has received 42 separate complaints that relate to one planning matter which has impacted these totals.

5.3 The total of 125 includes 2 complaints that were started at stage 2.

5.4 **Figure 2** overleaf is an updated version of **Figure 1** with these planning complaints demarked:

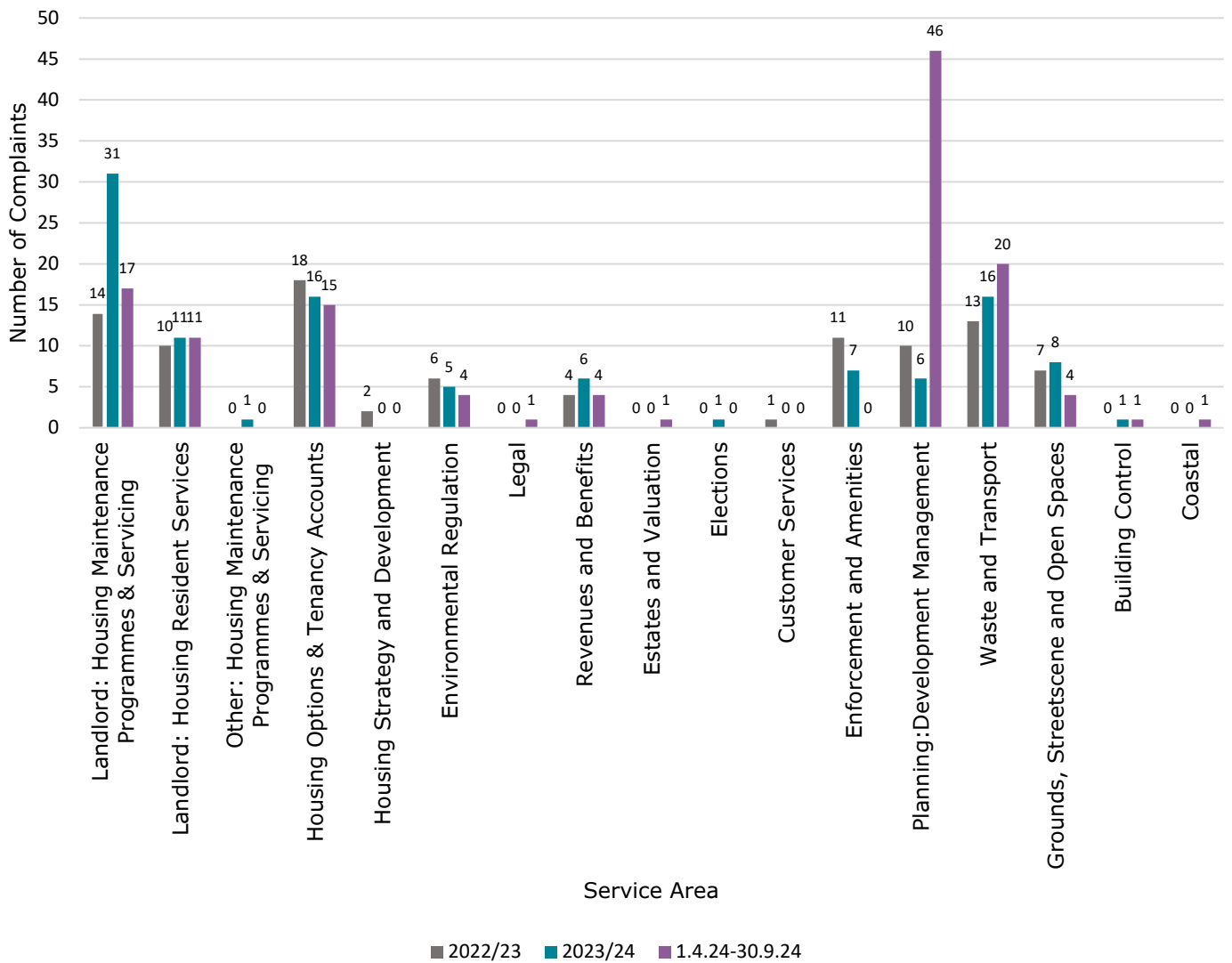


5.5 With the particular planning complaints identified in paragraph 5.2 above discounted for the purposes of comparison, the total of 83 complaints for the half year position shows that the trend in the total number of complaints is still increasing.

5.6 **Figure 3** overleaf shows the total number of complaints received for 2022/23, 2023/24 and the half year position, broken down by service area:

Figure 3

Comparison of Complaints by Service Area



5.7 The service areas with the largest increase in complaints for the half year period are Planning: Development Management, with a total of 46 complaints compared to 6 for the full year 2023/24 and Waste and Transport, with a total of 20 complaints compared to 16 for the full year 2023/24.

5.8 The reason for the significant increase in the Planning: Development Management complaints relates to the 42 complaints received regarding one planning matter as referred to at paragraph 5.2 above.

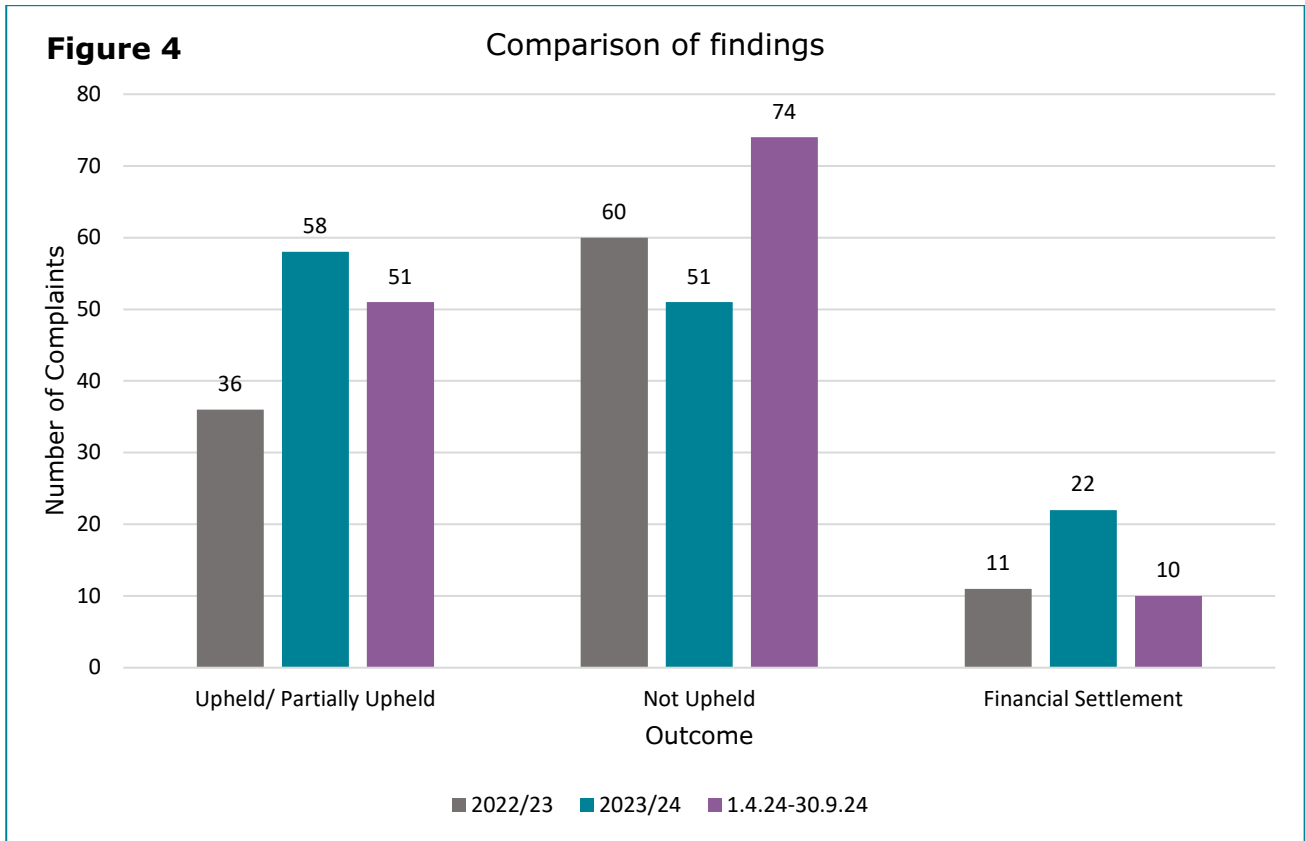
5.9 Of the 20 Waste and Transport complaints received for the half year period, 9 (45%) relate to the Council's garden waste service. From 1 April 2024, the Council introduced a new garden waste service using wheelie bins. This was a significant service change and during the first few months, after the new service was implemented, an increase in service requests and complaints was expected. For context, there are over 23,000 residents who have joined the new garden waste service. Additionally, 6 (30%) Waste and Transport complaints relate to issues with refuse bags being piled up and/or attacked by wildlife. A new domestic waste collection service is due to be rolled out across the District from summer 2025 which will involve the introduction of wheelie bins in accordance with our [Waste Strategy 2022 to 2027](#). One of the benefits of this service change is that it should alleviate issues related to the collection of refuse bags.

5.10 Several other service areas are showing the same or a similar number of complaints at the half year position, when compared to the full year 2023/24. This is in keeping with the general trend showing an increase in complaints received.

5.11 The service area showing the largest improvement in complaints at the half year position is Enforcement and Amenities who have received no complaints, compared with 7 for the full year 2023/24.

Complaint findings

5.12 **Figure 4** overleaf shows the number of complaints that were upheld or not upheld for 2022/23, 2023/24 and during the half year period covered by this report. It also shows the number of complaints that resulted in some form of financial settlement (including goodwill/time and trouble payments and compensation for losses). **Figures 4** and **5** include information based on responses sent by 21 October 2024, when this report was prepared.



5.13 **Figure 5** overleaf shows the percentage of complaints that have been upheld/ partially upheld and not upheld in 2022/23, 2023/24 and during the half year period covered by this report.

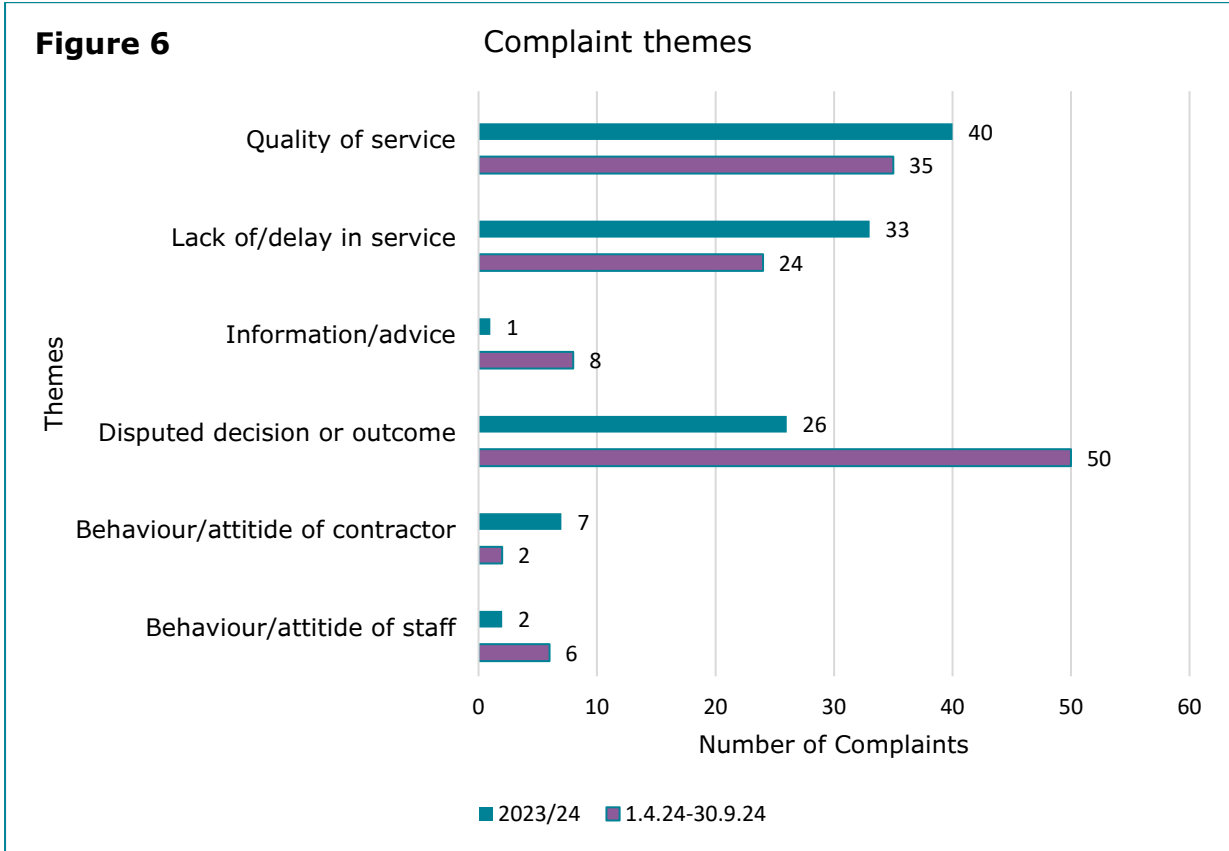
Figure 5



5.14 There has been a decrease in the proportion of complaints that have been upheld/partially upheld from 2023/24 (53%) compared to the half year position (41%).

Themes

5.15 **Figure 6** overleaf shows the complaints we have received in 2023/24 and at the half year position categorised by theme.

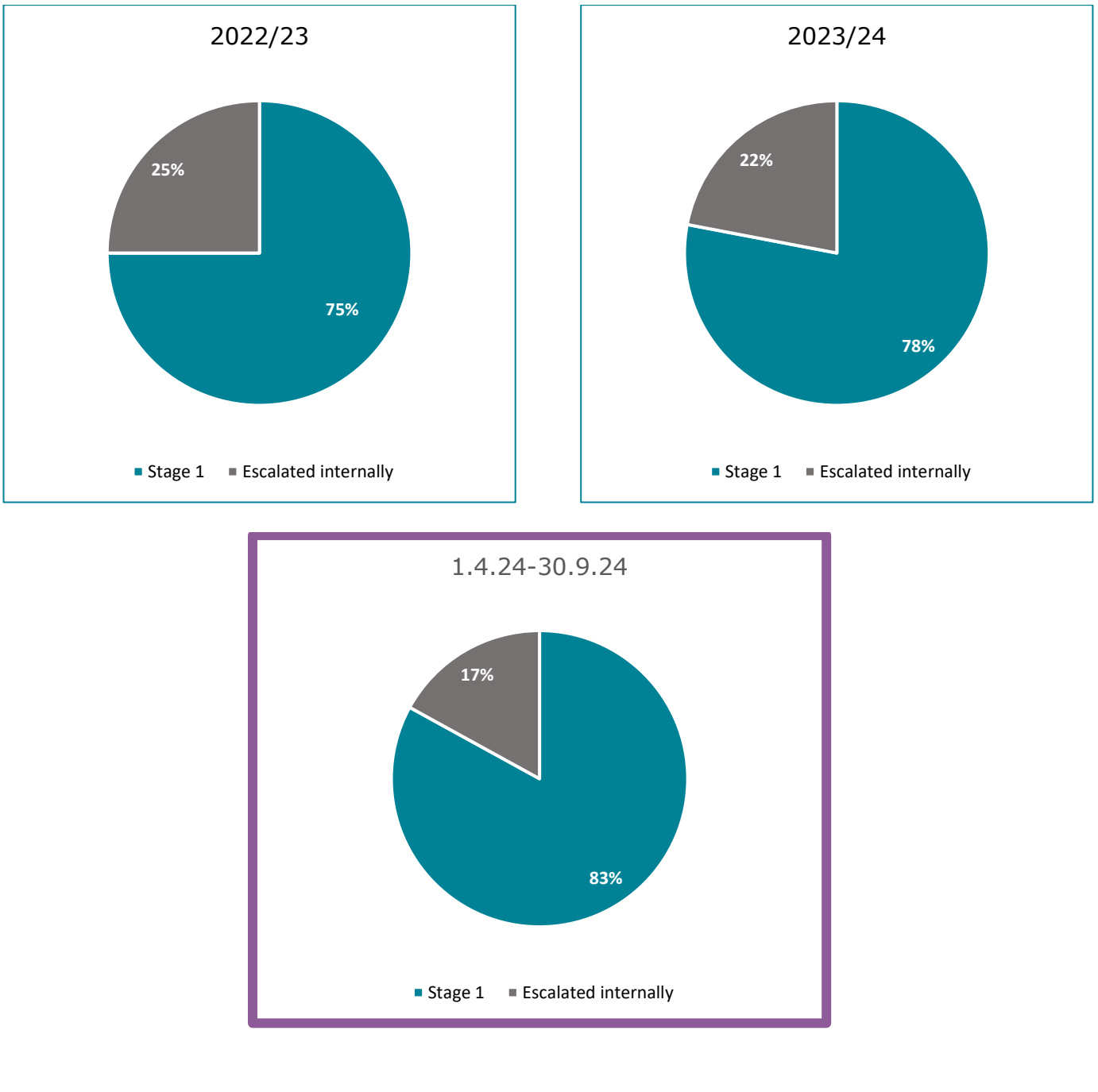


5.16 For the half year period the most common type of complaint has related to a disputed decision or outcome (40%). This is due to the planning complaints referred to at paragraph 5.2 above. This is followed by complaints related to quality of service received (28%) and lack of/delay in service (19%). There are some instances where complaints relate to more than one issue, but these have been categorised based on the most prevalent theme.

Stages

5.17 **Figure 7** overleaf shows the percentage of complaints that were either resolved at stage 1 or escalated to stage 2 of the corporate complaints procedure. This will not include the 2 complaints that were started at stage 2 but does include any stage 2 complaints that were escalated during the half year period (including where the stage 1 complaint may have been received in 2023/24).

Figure 7



5.18 The extent to which complaints escalate through the corporate complaints procedure is an important measure, as it is preferable to find resolutions for complainants at the earliest possible stage. As shown in **Figure 7**, the majority of complaints in the half year period (83%) were resolved at stage 1 and therefore only 17% of all complaints were escalated internally, compared with 22% in 2023/24.

Timescales

5.19 In 2023/24 100% of complaints were responded to within the timescales included in the corporate complaints procedure that was applicable at that time.


5.20 For the half year period, 97% of stage 1 complaints and 100% of stage 2 complaints were responded to within the timescales included in the corporate complaints procedure as detailed at paragraph 3.2 above or with an agreed extension in accordance with the codes.


6. Complaints from tenants


Summary – 1 April 2024-30 September 2024

28
Complaints received
28 complaints received from tenants

%
61% of tenant complaints relate to Housing Maintenance, Programmes and Servicing


Decrease in the proportion of complaints being upheld (54% compared to 69% for 2023/24)


The half year position shows tenant complaints are increasing


Most common themes for tenant complaints are quality of service (36%) and lack of/delay in service (36%)

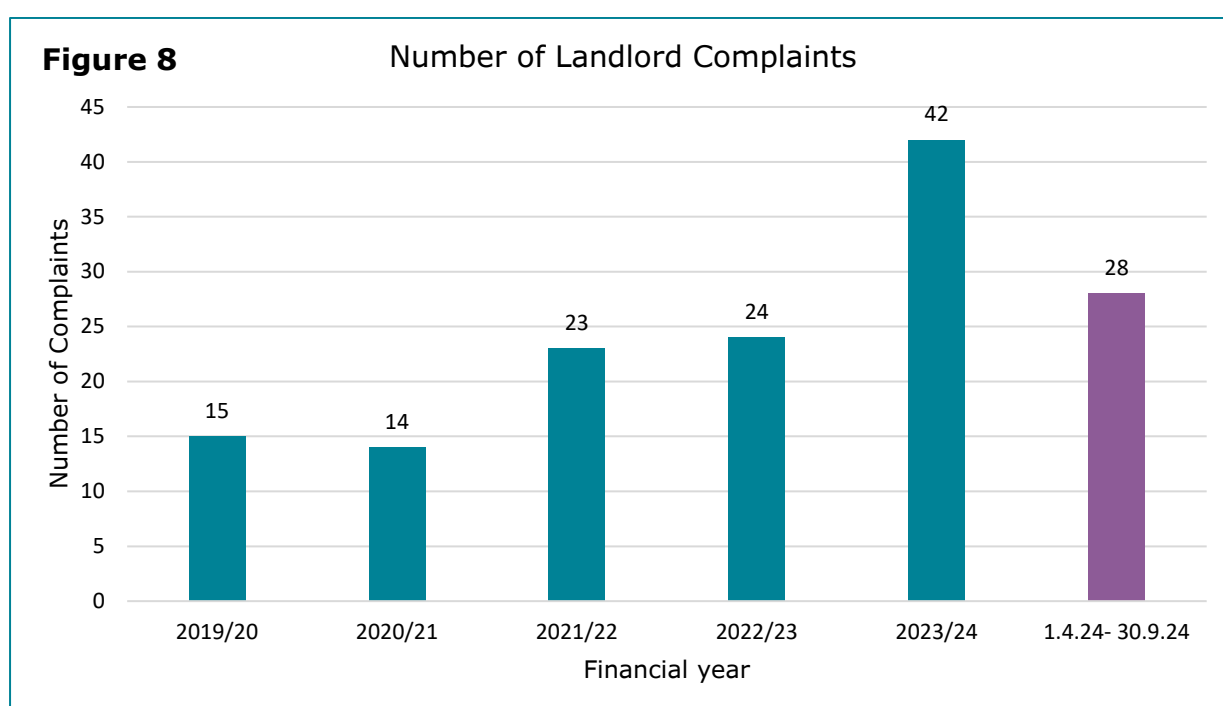

96% of stage 1 and 100% of stage 2 complaints responded to within procedure timescales

Analysis

Numbers

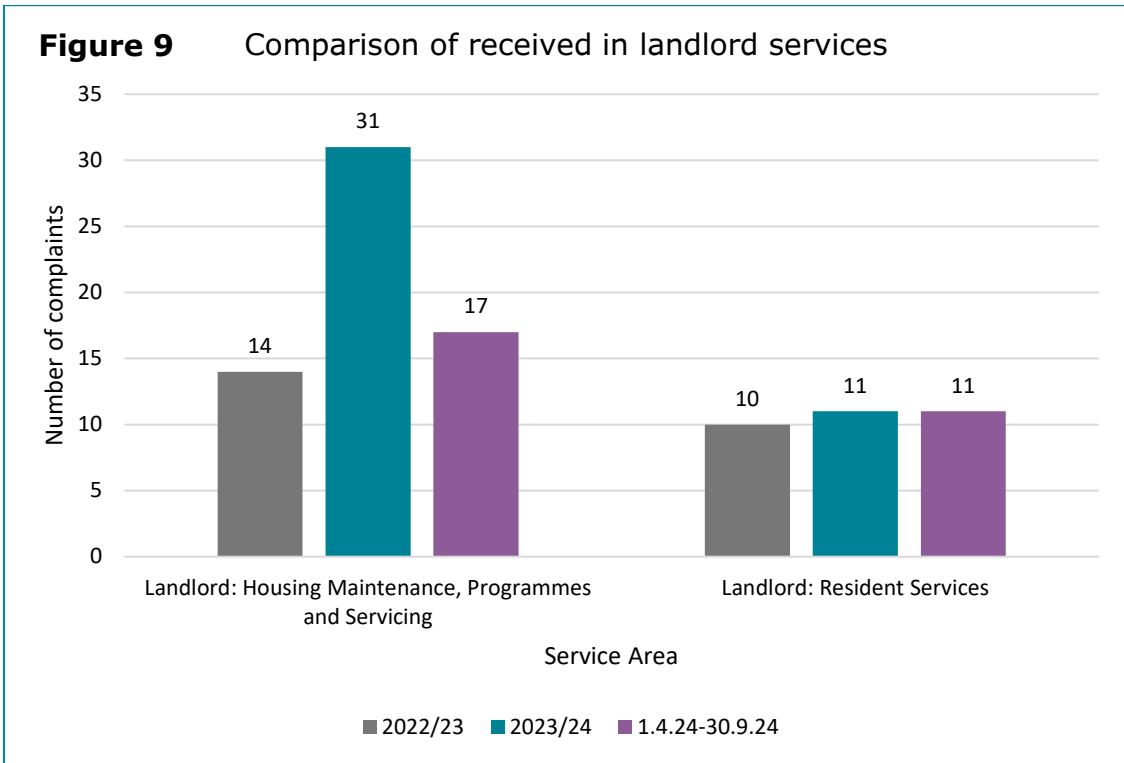
6.1 As of the end of 2023/24 we had 5,285 Council properties that we either owned or managed and let to tenants.

6.2 **Figure 8** below shows the total number of new complaints received by year from tenants to us in our capacity as their landlord with the half year position included in purple:

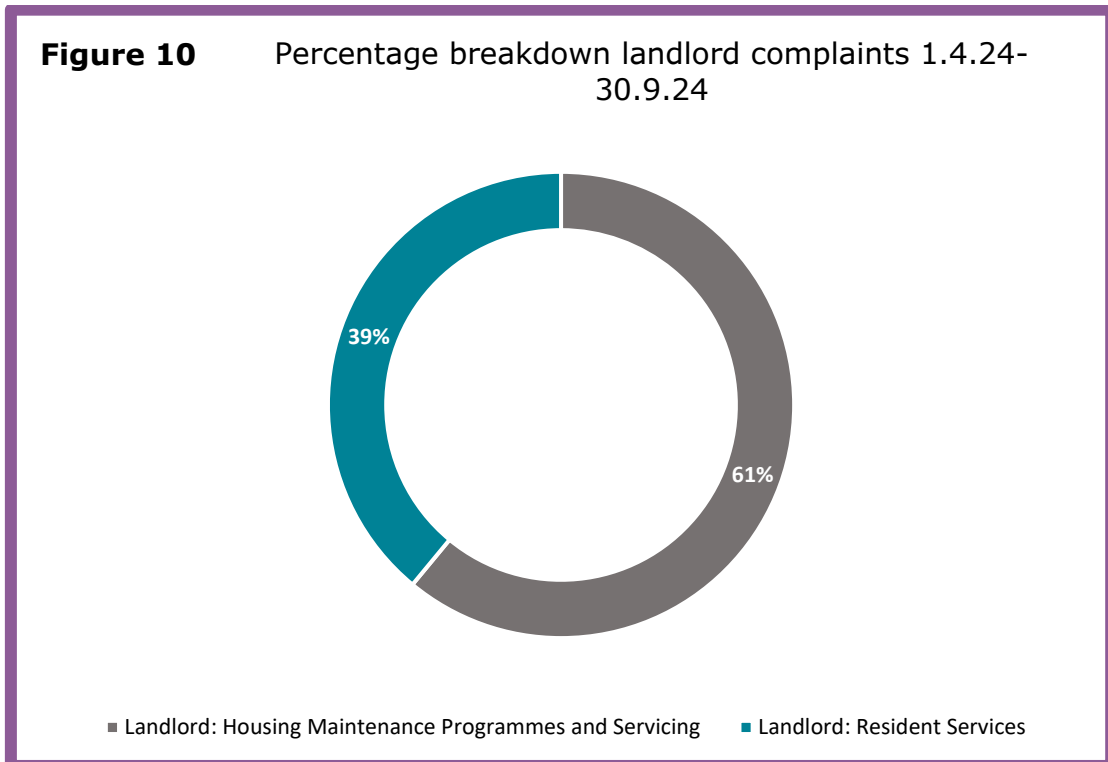


6.3 At the half year position, 28 complaints have been received by the Council from tenants in its capacity as their landlord.

6.4 **Figure 9** overleaf breaks down the landlord services complaints received by service area.



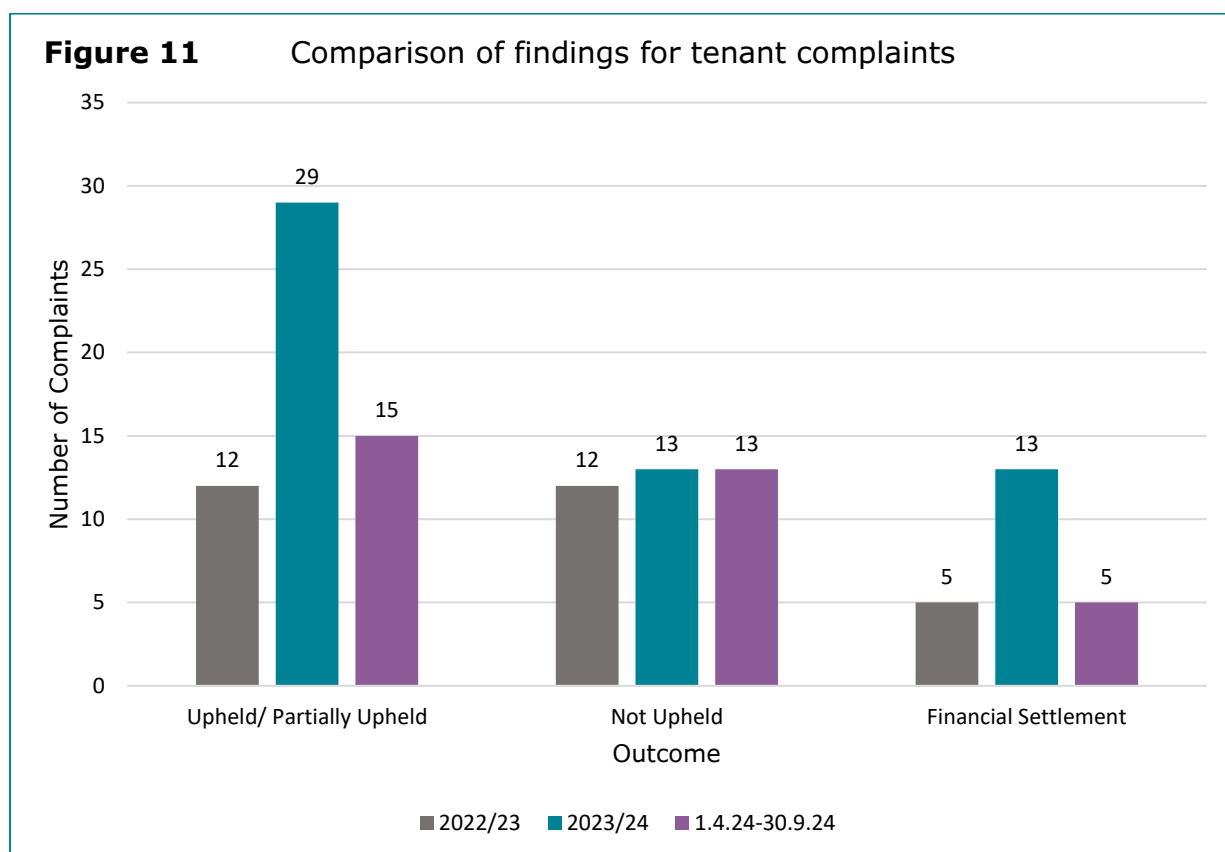
6.5 The percentage breakdown of complaints relating to landlord services for the half year period is shown in **Figure 10** below:



6.6 This compares to 26% for Landlord: Resident Services and 74% for Landlord: Housing Maintenance Programmes and Services for the year 2023/24.

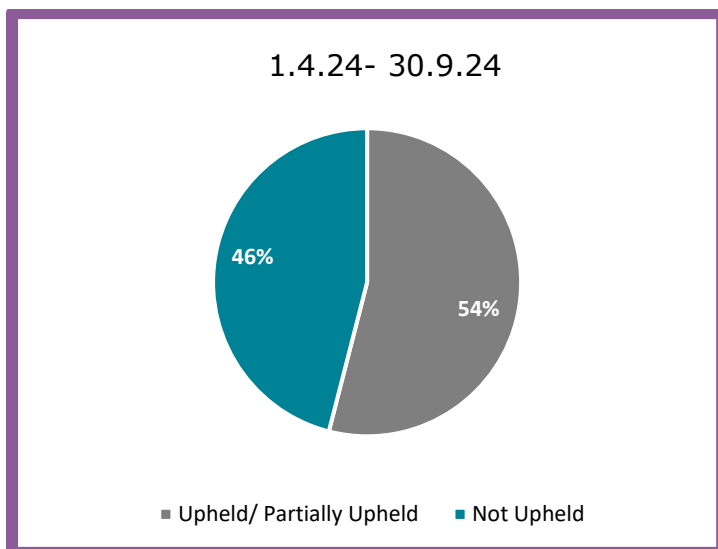
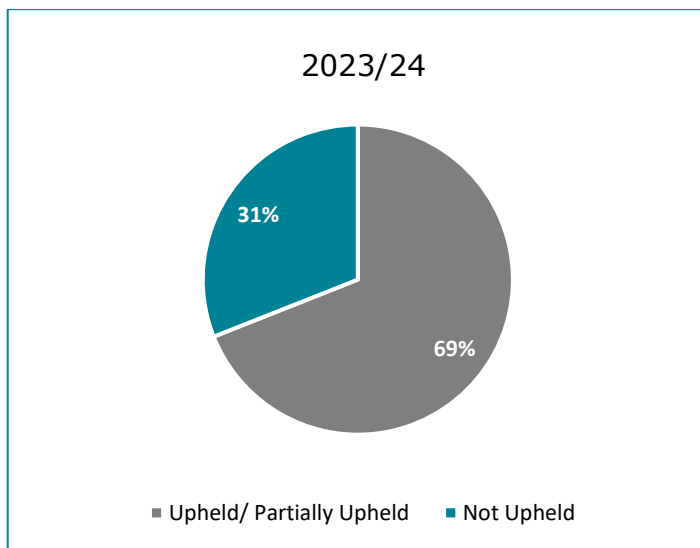
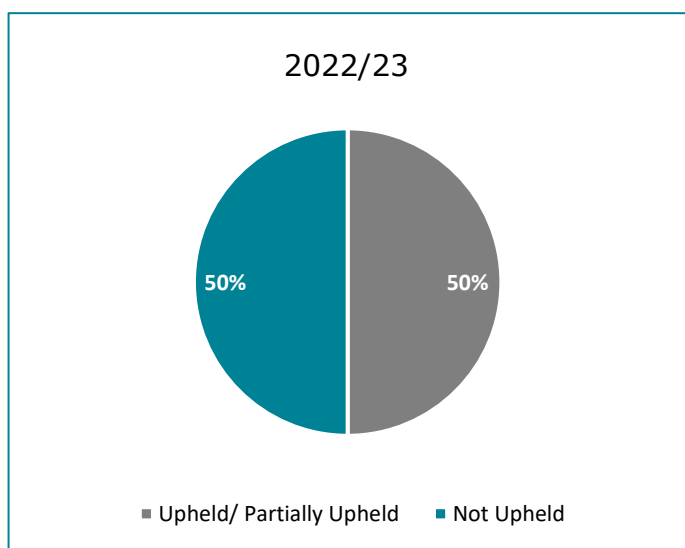
Complaint findings

6.7 **Figure 11** below shows the number of tenant complaints that were upheld or not upheld for 2022/23 compared to 2023/24 and at the half year position. It also shows the number of complaints that resulted in some form of financial settlement (including goodwill/time and trouble payments and compensation for losses).



6.8 **Figure 13** below shows the percentage of tenant complaints that have been upheld/ partially upheld and not upheld in 2022/23, 2023/24 and during the half year period covered by this report.

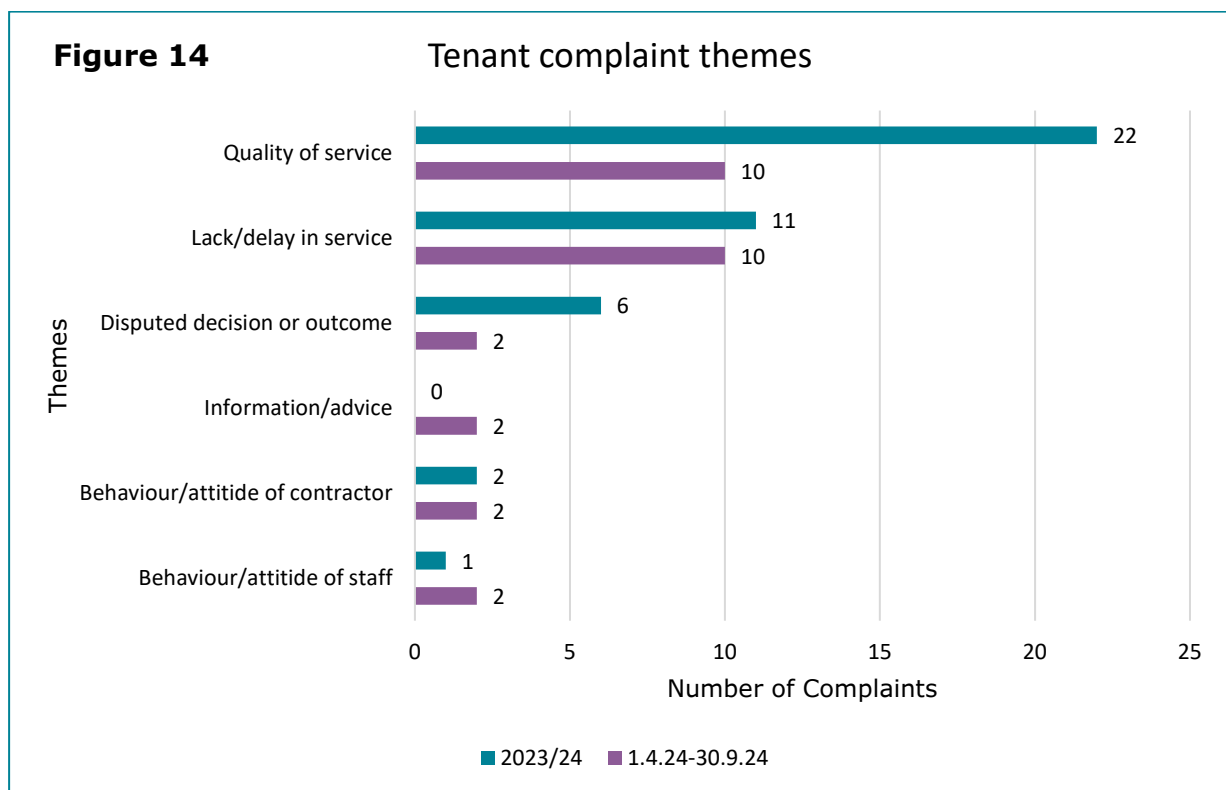
Figure 13



6.9 There has been a decrease in the proportion of tenant complaints that have been upheld/partially upheld at the half year position (54%) compared to 2023/24 (69%).

Themes

6.10 **Figure 14** below shows the tenant complaints we have received in 2023/24 and at the half year position categorised by theme.

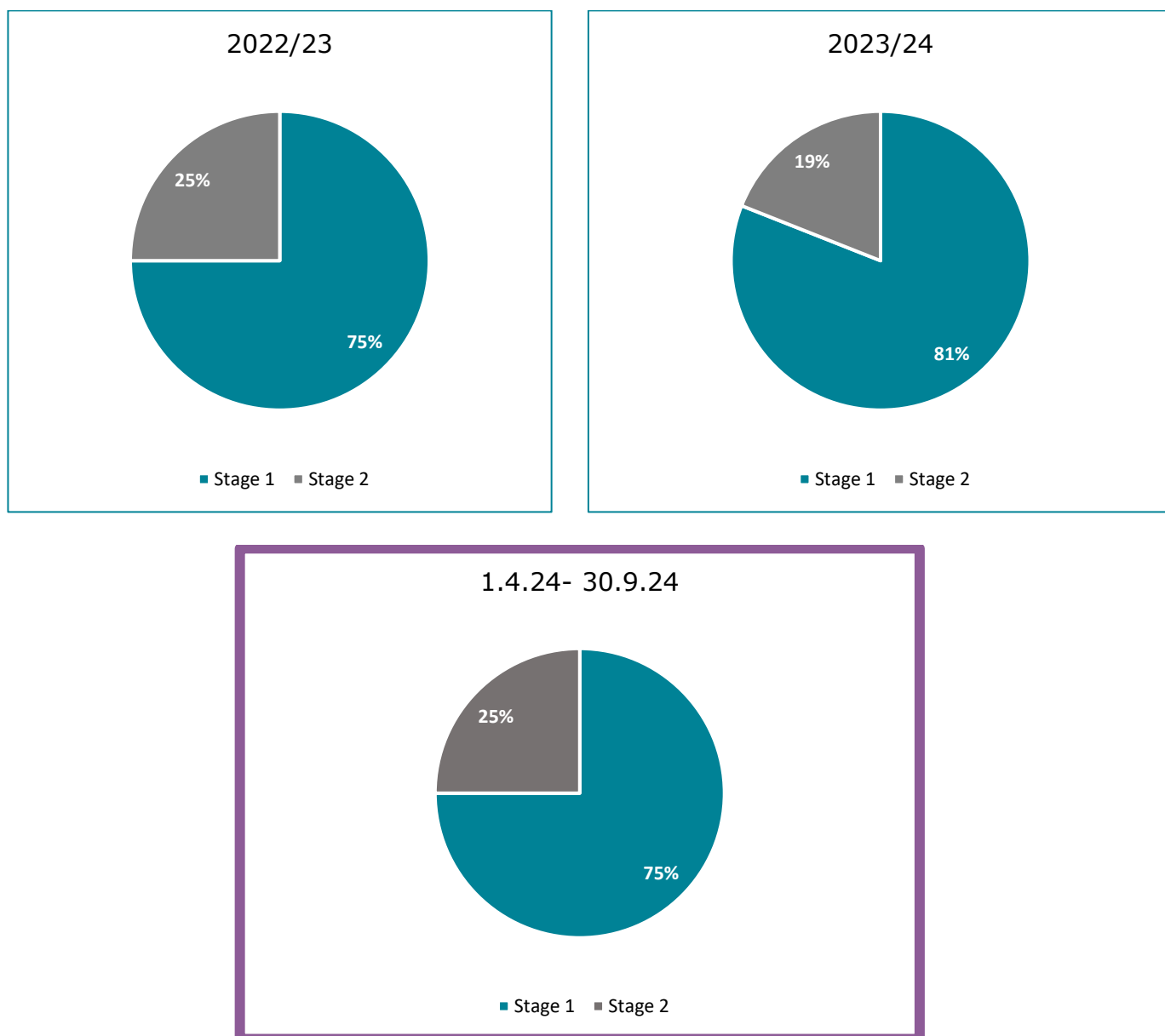


6.11 The most common types of tenant complaint have related to the quality of service received and lack of/delay in service (36% each). There are some instances where tenant complaints relate to more than one issue, but these have been categorised based on the most prevalent theme.

Stages

6.12 **Figure 15** below shows the percentage of tenant complaints that were either resolved at stage 1 or escalated to stage 2 of the corporate complaints procedure. This includes any stage 2 complaints that were escalated during the half year period (including where the stage 1 complaint may have been received in 2023/24).

Figure 15



6.13 The majority of tenant complaints at the half year position were resolved at stage 1 (75%).

Timescales

6.14 In 2023/24 100% of tenant complaints were responded to within the timescales included in the corporate complaints procedure that was applicable at that time.

6.15 For the half year period, 96% of stage 1 tenant complaints and 100% of stage 2 complaints were responded to within the timescales included in the corporate complaints procedure as included at paragraph 3.2 above or with an agreed extension in accordance with the complaint handling codes.

7. Complaints not accepted

- 7.1 Our corporate complaints procedure sets out what will not be considered as a corporate complaint.
- 7.2 This includes, but is not limited to, complaints against councillors, anonymous complaints, cases where other legal rights of appeal/review exist, or cases where we or the complainant has started legal proceedings.
- 7.3 Where we decide that a complaint cannot be dealt with as a corporate complaint, we will let the complainant know and advise them of their right to take that decision to the relevant Ombudsman.
- 7.4 During the half year period covered by this report, the following complaints were not accepted in accordance with the corporate complaints procedure:

Nature of complaint	Reason not a corporate complaint (section 4.2 of corporate complaints procedure)
Complaint regarding recovery of parking ticket fine	'cases where other legal rights of appeal/review exist, including complaints about a Penalty Charge Notice (parking ticket) or recovery action taken after the issue of the ticket'
Complaint regarding refusal to write off a debt	'Complaints which have already exhausted this Procedure'

- 7.5 We also have complaints that are not dealt with as corporate complaints because they are service requests. Our procedure includes the following regarding service requests:

'Service requests where an individual is requiring the Council to take action to put something right.'

- *Such service requests will be recorded, monitored and reviewed regularly.*
- *Where an individual expresses dissatisfaction with the response to their service request, a complaint will be raised. Efforts to address the service request will continue.'*

7.6 Some service requests are received by the Information Governance and Complaints Team for allocation to the relevant service, but many service requests will be received directly by services.

8. Learning

8.1 We recognise the importance of learning from complaints. Below are some examples of service improvements that have been made as a result of complaints dealt with during 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024:

Case Study 1 – Environment and Regulation - Licensing

The complaint

A complaint was made regarding delays in the processing of a pleasure boat licensing application and requesting additional information from the applicant.

What did we do?

It was considered that the application was processed in a reasonable time, but the review of the complaint identified that the Council's website did not inform applicants of response and processing times. Further information was added to the website and internal guidance updated to require contact with an applicant if required information is missing from an application.

What is the ongoing service improvement?

Increasing transparency in the licensing process and managing applicants' expectations will improve the standard of service for pleasure boat licence applicants.

Case Study 2 – Landlord: Resident Services

The complaint

A complaint was made that the Council was trying to recover rent for a period of time after the tenant believed they had terminated their tenancy and left the property, but had not left vacant possession. The reason for leaving the property related to concerns about the behaviour of person who remained.

What did we do?

An update was added to standard letters advising tenants of the requirements regarding the end of tenancy process to include vacant possession. Steps will be taken to review and update policies and procedures relating to end of tenancy and vacant possession, particularly where disclosures regarding the behaviour of someone living at the property are made.

What is the ongoing service improvement?

Having updated policies and procedures will improve consistency and the support/signposting provided to tenants. Making sure information provided to tenants is up to date and complete will assist with managing expectations.

Case Study 3 – Environment and Regulation - Environmental Protection

The complaint

A complaint was received regarding the handling of alleged noise nuisance.

What did we do?

Whilst it was considered that the investigation had been handled appropriately, it was identified that further information regarding the statutory nuisance investigation process should be published on the Council's website.

What is the ongoing service improvement?

Increasing transparency in the statutory nuisance investigation process will improve the customer experience.

Case Study 4 – Landlord: Housing Maintenance, Programmes and Servicing

The complaint

A complaint was received from a tenant relating to repair issues at their property. This included that some agreed drainage works that were identified several years ago had not been completed and that other issues had been raised on multiple occasions before being rectified.

What did we do?

We apologised for the delays and steps were taken to progress these works. Steps have been taken to avoid repair works being missed through introduction of more comprehensive housing management software. We have introduced reporting to raise alerts for multiple repair requests or repeat repair requests so that issues can be resolved sooner.

What is the ongoing service improvement?

Improved software and alerts will increase repair requests being actioned without delay.

9. Ombudsman decisions

Summary – 1 April 2024-30 September 2024



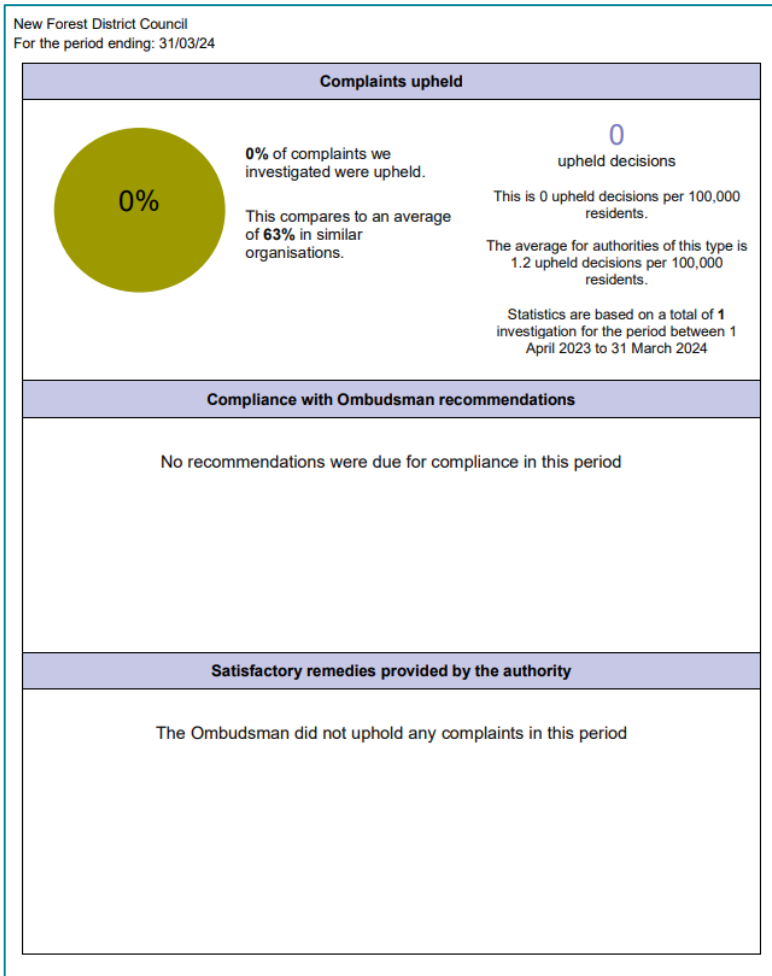
Right to escalate

- 9.1 If complainants are not satisfied with our response to their complaint, when they have exhausted our internal corporate complaints procedure, they can escalate their complaint to either the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman or, for tenants, the Housing Ombudsman.
- 9.2 Both Ombudsman services will generally not investigate complaints unless the complainant has completed our internal procedure. However, complainants can contact the relevant Ombudsman at any stage during their complaint.

Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

Annual review letter

- 9.3 The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman provides us with an annual review letter each year in July which includes a summary of complaint statistics for complaints which have escalated to them. This covers the preceding financial year.
- 9.4 Our annual review letter for 2023/24 was not available at the time the Annual Report was prepared. The complaint statistics from the 2023/24 letter are shown below:



9.5 The annual review letter for 2023/24, and previous years, is published on the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman’s website: [Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman - New Forest District Council Annual Reviews](#).

9.6 Our performance is also viewable on the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman’s website: [Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman - New Forest District Council Performance](#)

Investigations and findings

9.7 We are not always aware of every complaint or enquiry that is made to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

9.8 Our records show that there has been 1 complaint decided by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, during the half year period covered by this report, related to the Council. This was closed after initial enquiries.

Housing Ombudsman

Performance report

9.9 The Housing Ombudsman publishes individual landlord performance reports for landlords with 5 or more findings for a particular financial year. These reports are available on the Housing Ombudsman's website: [Housing Ombudsman - Landlords Archive](#)

9.10 There is no landlord performance report relating to the Council currently published on the Housing Ombudsman's website.

Investigations and findings

9.11 As with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, we are not always aware of every complaint or enquiry that is made to the Housing Ombudsman.

9.12 Our records show that there have been no determinations made by the Housing Ombudsman, during the half year period covered by this report, related to the Council.

10.Compliments

10.1 It is important to recognise the good work that officers of the Council do, as well as identifying where improvements can be made.

10.2 Managers and officers are encouraged to pass on compliments and positive feedback that has been received. A compliments inbox (compliments@nfdc.gov.uk) has been set up to assist with this.

10.3 Below are anonymised examples of the positive feedback that has been received by some of our service areas during the half year period covered by this report.

Landlord: Housing Maintenance, Programmes and Servicing

“ Many thanks for the repair carried out this morning by xx. He has done his usual great job, very much appreciated”.

“ Tenant called and said ‘He ... was very happy with the service and input he received from us...”

“A big thank you for the fencing work we have just had completed”

“ I just wanted to say that the team carrying out the work on the soakaway have done an excellent job.”

“Tenant called in she is thrilled and really full of praise for the works we completed today. She would like to pass on her thanks to the worker and commend his wonderful craftsmanship.”

“The tenant from xx has called in to say she is really happy with works xx has done today and how nice polite and helpful he has been 😊”

"Whilst doing building checks at xx, I bumped into the tenant in xx, who has lived at this address for 10 years. He praised me and NFDC for the work we are doing and said he and his family was 110% happy with where they are and the work we do – we fix problems very quickly"

"I had workman here Monday I must say xx so polite and helpful ... He is a lovely man! Please pass this onto his boss please!"

" Tenant has called in to the Hub this morning to pass on her thanks and compliments to our operative xx for all his hard work in the back garden, she is extremely grateful."

" I would also inform you that the workman who came was absolutely wonderful he worked so quickly and soon was able to find the problem after many tries. Definitely someone to keep on your 'book's'. Thank you again."

" Compliments given over the phone to operative xx for a job he was on yesterday, at xx Tenant noted xx is a very hardworking man and should get recognition as such. All is done to a very high standard..."

"... I wanted to say that he was both very friendly and efficient at his job; he made me feel very much at ease, and also made sure to explain what he'd just done afterwards clearly. He basically did everything just the way you'd hope it would be, and as such I thought it important to pass on my compliments, and give full credit where it's due. If you could pass on these thoughts, thanks and best wishes, it would be much appreciated.."

" I would like to thank the three guys who came one last week and two today who were lovely guys and did a great job. Especially thank you xx for a brilliant job..."

"Xx called the Hub this afternoon to pass on her thanks and compliments to both the call taker and the tradesman who helped her today..."

"Thank you to kitchen fitter (contractor) I can never thank you enough for the care and respect they gave me whilst they carried out to work on my kitchen. They put my needs above the work. They have kept me informed and each and every day they have made sure I was safe They left the kitchen clear of trip hazards..."

" Tenant called regarding her replacement driveway.

She said that everyone at NFDC and our contractors had all 'gone above and beyond' and 'gone out of their way to make everything easier' for her. She is absolutely delighted with the work and with the way she has been treated all along..."

" I would like to convey my grateful thanks to xx and his workforce for being so thorough, so kind and considerate to my needs. xx went above and beyond ...he ensured his crew did the same. Amazing workers and nothing was too much trouble."

Landlord: Resident Services

" I would like to say thank you. The property on xx road is beautiful, it's everything I hoped for it really is. I have accepted the flat and we sign the tenancy agreement tomorrow! I am very delighted to be able to relax and not have to worry all of the time. You have helped me in many ways, you have listened to me and have taken my situation into consideration and you did all you could to give me an amazing place to live with all of the beautiful surroundings. I am excited to move into the property."

"xx, again I must reiterate that every day I go and visit Mum and every time she is in her kitchen and singing your praises! The kitchen refit has made such a massive difference to her, not only physically, but mentally as well!"

" Two residents at xx would like to offer feedback on xx, the regular cleaner. 'she's great, she does a fantastic job' they were very pleased with the regular cleaning that she does!"

"I've just had a chat with xx and she wanted me to convey her thanks to all the team who helped xx and those who have given their assistance to her over the last week. xx said that it's been a great help to her and her children knowing xx was in great hands, and that he was very optimistic about the move on accommodation he'd been allocated.!"

"Hi xx, thank you for your time yesterday and the smooth and caring sign-up process."

"Mum of tenant, passes thanks through to xx for all her help..."

"Tenant wanted to pass on how lovely, helpful, and efficient everyone has been in dealing with all her recent issues and what an amazing and efficient service we provide. She is very happy."

" I would also like to thank you for your help and support at a very difficult time. "

Housing Options and Tenancy Accounts

"xx, I have to say a huge thank you to you for your help, advice, and reassurance during this nightmarish time...Thank you again,"

"Thank you, xx, you've been amazing at helping me"

" Thank you, xx, I really appreciate all that you're doing and helping us so much."

" Just want to say thank you for everything you have done for me and my children. It's much appreciated, thank you."

" xx, I Just like to say how jolly efficient and kind you have been. Well done and thank you..."

"xx, Thanks for your email, it has been a pleasure having a great contact in the New Forest."

"Tenant ...wanted to thank everybody involved with assisting her mum to be re-housed, she said she cannot believe the difference it has made to xx and how happy she now is...She asked for special thanks to xx as you showed her around ... she is now in a secure, safe place she loves,"

" Tenants both said how great and supportive you both have been, and they are very grateful for all your help.."

" Thank you, xx,... you have been a godsend in a really difficult time for me.."

"Thank you to xx-So great news!!!! Thanks a million!!!I wanted to say a huge thank you again for your help and participation!!! This is incredibly good news; we are very happy!..."

"Thank you for all your help."

" Me and my wife really grateful to you for your help! Without your assistance we can't proceed, previously we tried but unsuccessfully :(Thanks a million, to You!"

"Thank you for all your support"

" Thank you for your help with this application. In an age of social media and ever-increasing technology it is great to speak to someone who can and does help!"

"Thank you for sending me this amazing piece of news!...Its taken a massive weight from my shoulders and I should be able to finally get a good nights sleep tonight. Thank you so much for your help and advice."

"I really wanted to express my appreciation and thanks to the absolutely wonderful staff from the nfdc that have made such a difference along the way, xx from the allocation team has been not only incredibly helpful but empathetic and kind, she listened and really cared about my xx, her quick reactions and competence really did start this whole process..."

Community safety and support

“Hi just really wanted to say thank you again Thank you for today don't think you realise the difference you've just made!”

“I just wanted to say thank you for all your help, support and guidance over the past couple of years – I've loved working with you. The range of issues you deal with is immense and how you keep on top of it all is beyond me. There have been some real challenges as I'm sure there will continue to be – but I think some of the relationships and working arrangements we've put in place will only serve to make the partnership (and therefore the New Forest) stronger and safer.
Thanks again for everything”

Environmental and Regulation

“Thank you and a quick note to say how good an experience it has been to work with you and the team on the ground. Lots of useful advice by everyone, respectful and very customer friendly. You and the team are a shining light not just to the council, but business in general on how to engage with the general public...”

“ Thank you very much for this information and making sure we are all kept safe.”

“ THANKYOU , you are still my favourite Licensing authority !!”

“ Many thanks for your email. I think you should know that you are by far the easiest and most efficient Licensing team to deal with! Many thanks”

“ ...I just wanted to say again thanks to you and all concerned in Licensing ... every time I've communicated with NFDC you've all been super polite and helpful”

"I have had excellent service from licensing department over the past 13 years and thank you for the friendly and efficient way I have been looked after. "

" Thank you for your most kind letter of xx, which is much appreciated. "

Revenues and Benefits

"...I was met with another member of your staff, xx who again was patient, kind and incredibly efficient."

"... I just wanted to say again, thank you so much for keeping an eye on things with me and for the increased support... I am grateful for good people like yourself working in and around this process and your support is so very much appreciated Thank you, not just for me, but for my children, whose well being your are also assisting."

"...Many thanks for arranging this for me. The staff at Lymington made the whole process very easy please pass my thanks".

Coastal

"Please pass on my personal thanks to the NFDC team who provided so much information ... all the best to you and thanks again...."

" We are also very grateful for the coastal team - you have always given very prompt and thorough responses whenever we contacted you during our beach hut search"

Waste and Transport

“Thank you very much for your kind reply. The operatives work hard and at a pace. The new bins should solve it all.
I [would] like to say a huge thank you for resolving the issue of the domestic waste... Long may it continue”

“ Many thanks to the team ... They were really friendly and did a really great job, an asset to the council...”

“I have just had a visit from xx and write to state my gratitude for the swift and timely manner he dealt with my complaint.”

“We wanted to write to extend our gratitude to the refuse collectors...Our 2 year old boy, xx, eagerly awaits the bin collection every xx morning and loves to go out and watch the team collect our bins. They are always incredibly friendly with him and take the time to stop, wave and chat and let him see what they're doing. Please ensure [our] appreciation is shared with them and their line managers.”

11. Conclusion

11.1 This report provides a half yearly update on our complaint handling from 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024.

11.2 It is vital that complaints are responded to adequately and in a timely manner and that our corporate complaints procedure works effectively for both complainants and staff.

11.3 Complaints serve as one of the Council's most important intelligence sources and learning from complaints, and developing meaningful service improvements, will drive our complaints handling going forward. We will continue to work on the actions identified in the Annual Report to improve our complaint handling.

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