

Leader of the Opposition - Budget Speech

The Conservatives have run this council for over 20 years although few of you were there then. During that time collectively they have become comfortable in thinking they know all the answers and are doing everything right. The administration has become complacent and conservative with a little change doing a bit but actually never enough to make a difference to the quality of New Forest residents' lives that it could. That conservatism in politics and outlook has led to a lack of ambition, initiative and focus on what is really needed and this budget reflects that state of affairs.

For example the housing needs register is currently 1408 mixed bedroom properties but the plan is only to build 600 homes by 2026, 42% of those needed, no ambition to deal fully with the ongoing issue. In contrast Liberal Democrats would look to solve the housing need problem not just let them roll on.

The government has provided extra funding and that combined with the prudent management of the finances by the officers of the council have put this council in a comfortable place despite the impact of the pandemic and the potential future loss of business rates on the horizon. So is the administration looking to give something to the New Forest council taxpayers to help those that need it? No, this budget does not address the needs of our most vulnerable residents, it does not know who they are and, of course, it does not address the issues that need action.

The administration makes decisions without the data on those most in need, it wants to raise rents by 4.1%, for example, based upon the tenant representative suggesting that it is fair. What about the social economic position of our tenants as a whole? Is there empirical evidence for how many residents in the New Forest are in fuel poverty even before the April rise? No. Is there a clear understanding of how many New Forest residents use food bank? No. Yet you make decisions like the rent rises without knowing the precise impact they will have on people in need or people on the edge of need. Perhaps worst of all, the council used to discuss the issue of Child poverty. I asked a NFDC officer for the current data and the officer did not know, the council did not know. I do not blame the officer it is because it is not a council priority, it is not even on this administration's radar.

Well on 20/21 figures amongst our New Forest school age children there are 16.20% on free school meals compared to 15.50% across the county and 16% across the South East region. These figures equate to 3,347 children being in poverty. The Liberal Democrats recognise the seriousness of this problem and the importance of helping these young children in need before their situation leads to even more severe issues. The Liberal Democrats propose allocating £50,000 for a resource to investigate and work with other agencies to focus on solutions to this serious issue. No New Forest child should live in poverty in the 21st century.

Taking young people out of poverty and into employment should be a focus to prevent the cyclic occurrence of poverty, crime and deprivation that exist in some parts of our district even today. What are you doing about apprenticeships beyond

the few working in the council itself and how many have you created outside the council by encouraging local organisations to take them on? This administration should be doing more to help the young. The Liberal Democrats propose another £50,000 be allocated to increase apprenticeship and other training opportunities, The benefits for young people and the district are clear as we are helping create the council taxpayers of tomorrow by ensuring they are given the skills and training to become fully employed, contributing to society and having a productive, positive life.

What can happen when we do not deal with the impact of deprivation? Sadly, all too often for some it turns to crime and disorder and whilst we have a comparatively safe district compared to other parts of the UK, there is still crime. Crime figures are not decreasing. In reality there were 12,788 crimes in the New Forest during 2020 and the under resourced Police service has nothing like the number of officers it had before the Conservative government slashed the staffing to the bare minimum. One of the cuts removed crime prevention officers and the crime prevention work, which was so valued.

We Liberal Democrats recognise that feeling safe in our communities is a fundamental part of the quality of life, which we as councillors should have as a main priority. So we propose allocating £50,000 to fund a crime prevention officer working in our community safety team and a further £50,000 on resources to fund a crime prevention programme and initiatives. This will not only help reduce crime through practical crime prevention activities but help reduce the fear of crime by providing appropriate advice to help people feel safer and secure in their own communities.

We have an ageing population (more than 53,000 over 65). With age comes an increasing need of medical help and support. That very often goes hand in hand with a reduced capacity to drive themselves to medical appointments. There are some charitable organisations which can help, but it is not enough. New Forest residents, and in particular those in the eastern half of the district, often need to get to Lymington hospital or the General hospital in Southampton. There is no direct public transport to take them. No regular bus service and if there are no hospital cars available they either have to get a relative with a car or pay high taxi fares to get to much needed hospital appointments. This is not what our elderly residents want, nor deserve. The Liberal Democrats propose allocating £200,000 and working in partnership with Hampshire County Council, our local Town and Parish councils and bus companies to provide a regular bus service to the hospitals. Liberal Democrats believe we should extend help and support to our elderly residents.

Now, how would we fund it? The administration has been squirreling money away before into reserves only now is it taking £1.25 million and putting it in the capital budget to pay for any pension fund imbalances. It is a little piggy bank that can be raided if you wish for other things but we know the pension fund over recent years has done rather well and has not needed a top-up as it did in the past. Therefore I propose we take the £400,000 from this nest egg to fund our proposals, which still leaves over £800,000 in the administration's special reserve. After all, if the administration can move £300,000 from the General Fund to the capital fund to pay

for Lymington's toilets you can put less money in the capital fund to help with revenue items, which will help New Forest people.

Members of the administration you do not know all the answers, nor are you really in touch with what our residents need. You do not listen to what is said on the doorstep, we do. You do not look beyond your party philosophy, we do. You exist in a New Forest Conservative bubble, which will burst unless you listen to those outside the complacent 'its ok' world you live in. Listen to those, who want to help ordinary New Forest people, hear what is needed and support these Liberal Democrat alternative budget proposals. Be here for the people not the party!