

BUDGET SPEECH – LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION

The Conservative budget is the same as they have produced before, year on year unimaginative, uncaring and out of touch with the community this council should be serving. In a cost of living crisis with high interest rates, high food, energy and basic living expenses have they looked how to support New Forest people, have they come up with something different to help with the current financial climate ? No because they do not understand or recognise what is going on around them. Just the same old thing delivering nothing new. If you do the same old thing, you get the same old result, financial mediocrity.

The Liberal Democrats do not believe in producing more mediocrity and have been out listening to New Forest residents and businesses to produce an alternative fully costed budget. The Liberal Democrats' budget is based upon what we have heard talking to New Forest residents to see what they want and they need in these challenging times. And we can all agree we live in challenging times. Listening to people it is clear we need a Fairer New Forest, where our residents feel safe in their communities, where business can thrive. Where people can work, earn a stable living and visitors can come and enjoy the Forest environment and contribute to the local economy. Our budget is about change, doing things differently to get a better result for local people.

The cost of living affects us all regardless of age or employment status, it is more expensive to live for everyone. It is equally challenging for local business with rising energy and material costs, too many local shops have disappeared. Liberal Democrats have spoken to both local traders and their customers in our community on how we can stop this.

We have listened to businesses in regards to what support they need to help start a business in our district. They want to see an enhanced introduction pack to start running a business in the New Forest explaining what is required legally, the technical requirements, which new business owners do not know. In addition to support our current businesses we would reshape our Business and Tourism activity to make it have a more focused business development support and advice role.

In addition we propose to freeze the price of all parking clocks for our car parks. Then provide one free two hour parking clock per New Forest Council tax paying residence, where there is car ownership for our town and village centre car parks. This one year trial will help our residents by reducing the cost of parking in their pocket and support our retail outlets by encouraging people to shop and stay local. It will be funded by raising the price at the ticket machine in line with parking charges in most surrounding areas and removal of the annual grant from the General fund into the Capital fund. The impact of this measure to be reviewed and provide a basis to decide what further support we can give local shoppers and businesses in the future.

There are on average 13 million visitor days to the New Forest each year, it is massive contribution to the district's local economy. We have listened to those businesses servicing the tourist sector and would employ a marketer to specialise in bringing events, which would attract more tourists to spend in our area.

We also propose the construction of a New Forest tourist App, which would be self- funding and easy for tourists to purchase and use showing the many fine places to visit in our unique District.

The benefits of the Freeport for business is clear and transparent but local people understandably want to know what is in it for them? What are the benefits for green,

sustainable living New Forest people will get from the Freeport development for example. New Forest Liberal Democrats want a regeneration strategy to show exactly what benefits local residents will receive to make up for the increased traffic and development of the Waterside area.

We want New Forest District council to be a serious driver in getting a clear transport infrastructure strategy in partnership with Hampshire County Council, one that shows the detail of how we will manage this potentially massive development. To compliment this the Liberal Democrats want more local input to the Local Cycling, Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP).

We propose a detailed community regeneration strategy using funding from the Freeport to conduct a feasibility study to develop those empty buildings in New Forest towns and villages for potential commercial or home use.

To further reduce the impact of the cost of living on our council tax payers Liberal Democrats want an enhanced programme of commercial developments to bring in revenue to subsidise council tax so that we would part fund improvements to our area from these revenue streams.

New Forest residents want to feel secure in their homes, and safe on their streets. Yet in 2022 there were 13,945 crime in the new Forest District area, a 9% rise on the 2020 figures. Liberal Democrats want this authority to take its community safety responsibilities more seriously and would fund a Crime Prevention officer, who would be imbedded in the Safer New Forest team working on strategies for both communities and advice for people and business to make their property more secure.

In support of the Police we want to instigate a feasibility study into funding in partnership with Town and Parish councils an Accredited Community Safety Service across the district, a service which already works well in some communities, which still have them in dealing with issues the Police do not have time or resources to address. We want to bring back a visible presence in our towns and villages to serve all our communities. Spending money on CCTV is fine but it only records the crime, we want to prevent it from taking place.

To compensate for the reduction by the Conservative party of police officers, a Liberal Democrats administration would campaign hard to get more Police in the New Forest district as keeping people safe is a major priority for our party.

Partnering Well Being is one of this council's portfolios yet the Conservative administration have given the management of the recreation centres to a third party, who we are still having to subsidise. New Forest residents tell us the service is poorer than when the authority used to run the centres, even the swimming pools are cold now. Our children and grandchildren are learning to swim in much colder swimming pools. Well Liberal Democrats take the wellbeing of our residents very seriously and we would look at the important issues being raised. We care particularly about the young of our district so we would part fund to the tune of £100k and work with other agencies to set up youth hubs to help and support the young people of our district.

Child poverty is a disgrace in the UK in the 21st century with our economy and even more so in a relatively well off area such as the New Forest. We have an above the average for Hampshire number of children on free school meals, which has risen since I raised it last year to 17.9% of all school children in our district compared to 17.1% for the county as a whole. That members is 3,385 New Forest school children up from the 3,339 it was last year. We Liberal Democrats care about this and we will put £500,000 initially over two years into a

project working with all appropriate agencies and charities to reduce child poverty in our district, this would be funded from unused reserves and any future underspend.

An important part of wellbeing is a leak proof roof over your head, we have currently around 1500 New Forest families on the Housing waiting list, so only building 600 homes is not good enough for them. There was a £4 million underspend on the social house building programme this year. Add to that £1 million unbudgeted extra spend on top of the existing £750k on bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless families.

Liberal Democrats recognise the work by the Housing department to deliver Social Housing, but there have been families on the waiting list for between 5 and 10 years! Liberal Democrats would look to build more houses, do things differently by using more innovative ways to fund a full house building programme. In addition we will ensure the new Local Plan to contains a detailed strategy for reducing the number of empty town and village centre properties by re-designating for residential. We will work to make a real positive change to the social housing situation in our district.

It was sad to see the Waterside Theatre in Holbury demolished. The NFDC role is in oversight to ensure that Arts Council funding is allocated in a strategic and impactful way. There is little sign of this happening enough from this administration. Culture and creativity are crucial elements in wellbeing so we will promote and support public and community art projects. Liberal Democrats propose allocating 50K fund as a pilot project for grants to apply for hiring creative spaces throughout the district for artistic and cultural use.

Protecting our unique environment is a key Liberal Democrat priority both in respect of the day to day living environment and protecting our future from the ravages of climate change.

In order to further encourage the use of electric cars and to subsidise our car parks we propose a feasibility study into covering areas of our car parks to allow the roofs to house solar panels. This will not only generate electricity for the charging points but to sell the excess power to the grid to pay for the maintenance of the car park.

A Liberal Democrat administration will continue to focus on the reduction of carbon usage across the authority's operations to meet the target for carbon neutrality as we want to protect our environment for futures generations of New Forest people.

New Forest District Council is responsible for the coast line of all the district along with the Environment Agency, so far it has mostly ignored the coastline east of Lymington and along the Waterside concentrating on the cost west of Lymington, where it has spent much, time effort and money. We will reshape the focus onto the highly populated sections so far ignored to further support the protection of the coastline and the areas to be developed for the Freeport.

Liberal Democrats propose a more focused Cleaner Streets strategy to improve the urban environments of our towns and villages to make them more attractive places to visit. In doing so we will have a strategy for wild planting to promote Bio-diversity and enhance the many small plots of land, which will further enrich the attractiveness of our communities and promote wildlife.

We have an ageing population which will only increase up to 2039 according to the Office for National Statistics so establishing public transport links through community transport projects is a necessity for our spread-out communities. Liberal Democrats want the council to work with our Town and Parish councils to instigate and promote community transport projects. It is appalling that the district's main hospitals at Lymington and Southampton General are not served by a direct bus service from the Waterside or the west of our district.

Our budget is a budget for change, a budget for a Fairer New Forest seeking to give something back to our residents and business. We have listened to what New Forest people have said and acted on it. It is designed to impact on the Cost of Living Crisis by stimulating business, making it cheaper to shop locally by giving a free two hour clock to council tax paying households with a car.

It lays out how we wish to improve the environment of our communities and continue looking at ways to positively impact climate change. Liberal Democrats will fight to protect our district's environment from defending the green space of Dibden Bay to reducing our carbon emissions.

We will fight for public transport and where we cannot get a satisfactory result we will investigate community transport options

Liberal Democrat recognise how important feeling safe and secure means to our residents for their quality of life and this budget makes Safer New Forest really safer by providing community safety actions, which currently do not exist.

The budget provides real actions to promote and help with wellbeing for the young and old alike understanding the complexities of daily life and how working with other agencies the district council can make a real positive difference.

This council from the previous budget and last year's underspends put around £3 million into reserves, which now total £58 million of which only £25 million is ear marked so before we charged with spending money we have not got that is clearly not the case. Combined with the underspends this council seems to generate under this administration we will probably not need to use much of the reserves anyway. However rather than speculating we have shown how can do it with the funds we currently have under our control, which as the **paper says will not affect the medium term financial plan.**

In these troubled and challenging times we need to do something to help New Forest residents and businesses, we need to do something different. That is why the Liberal Democrats want to give something back to all the people of the New Forest district

This is a budget for the all of our residents, for a Fairer New Forest.