

Leader's Budget Speech 2024

Once again, the Council's conservative administration is delivering a financially sound balanced budget. It is once again a budget that invests in valued services. It is a budget with a clear plan as to how we will look to achieve savings and generate additional income to further support and enhance what we do for our communities.

As a responsible administration, we continue to take pro-active steps in order to protect the medium to long term financial sustainability of this authority. That is what a conservative administration who are in this for the long haul does. We do not include unaffordable political gestures in our budget. Instead, we make sound decisions today, that result in a well-manged and well-funded New Forest District Council for years to come. I have every intention of ensuring this Council has no financial difficulties brought about through any decisions that we as the administration make. Instead, will we commit to a strategic approach, and take decisions with our eyes open, based on expert advice and facts, at the right time, and at the right financial level. Investing in this strategic approach is vital to our success, that is why the budget proposes investment in both a Parking Strategy and in a vehicle and fleet infrastructure strategy. Both will seek to modernise and improve the services we offer, and have the potential to make a significant difference in our desire to become a cleaner and greener Council.

In order to be financially responsible we have to take key decisions on things like increases to our housing rents, our Fees and Charges, and of course this authorities' level of Council Tax.

When it comes to housing rents, we're not looking to deviate away from central government policy, and so intend to follow the guideline of CPI plus one percent for our headline housing rent.

For fees and charges, we think it right that users of chargeable services pay a fair price, and a price that reflects the cost of delivering that service. Where we can be, we are also commercial in our approach, charging market rates for some services, so that net income generation can then support the delivery of other priority and critical services.

The proposed level of Council Tax for the 24/25 financial year represents a band D charge of just three pounds and eighty three pence per week. Three pounds and eighty three pence per week for all that this Council provides I

believe is exceptional value. Value that is only going to get better as a result of our investment in Council wide transformation, striving for better services at a lower overall cost, demonstrating well the administrations understanding of the need to provide value for money in all that we do.

And whilst some in our communities are supported with paying their Council Tax through the Council's adopted Reduction Scheme, there are some who can afford to pay more. This is why I am proposing the Council make use of new council tax premiums allowable as a result of recent new government legislation. With effect from the 1st April 2025, second homes located within the district will be charged an additional 100%, and empty homes will be charged an additional 100% after a period of 1 year, as opposed to the current 2. This will not only provide additional revenue to the council to further support critical services, but will also encourage homes to be brought back into use more quickly supporting the housing supply within the district.

I'm extremely pleased that within our budget, good growth in our business rates proves that business sentiment and performance within the District overall is strong. And small businesses will once again be supported with 100% government funded business rate relief meaning that a qualifying business with a rateable value of twelve thousand pounds or less won't have paid a penny in business rates since 2011. Overall, Business Rates, whether paid for by the businesses or funded by the government, support our 24/25 budget with eight point seven million pounds in retained funding. Rest assured, if any government think they will be able to significantly reduce our share of rates collected from businesses within our administrative area in any future fair funding reset, they will not do so without a fight from this conservative administration.

I recall last year, the leader of the opposition stating that our revenue budget didn't need to make contributions to our capital programme. And it was said recently that every penny spent should be on services delivering to our residents. But that's exactly what we do. Our plan outlines that we will be delivering a new depot at Hardley and enhancing our facilities at Marsh Lane and Ringwood ready to deliver our new waste service; a service delivered to every resident. We will be renovating St Georges Hall in Calshot and revitalising the offer for the local community. We have taken the bold step to develop our new Local Plan and local design code and have made provision for this within our budget and we will be delivering on our manifesto promise to enhance

CCTV provision across the District as we know how much our residents value feeling safe.

Over the next 3 years, the budget includes thirty-nine million pounds of proposed capital spending on General Fund services, and eighty-seven million pounds of proposed capital spending in the Housing Revenue Account that does nothing else but support the delivery of our key services. That level of spend NEEDS to be funded. It NEEDS to be supported from the revenue budget, it's not a question of choice, it's a fact.

I am extremely proud of this Council's strong reputation for being financially sound and well managed. It is because of that sound financial management that this council is still able to award three hundred and ten thousand pounds in community grants. There aren't many leaders of Council's across the Country that still have these types of sums available to distribute across the community. Yet here we are, supporting Honeypot Childrens charity, New Forest Disability information services, SPUD, the crossings, the handy trust, the list goes on. I know the need out there in our communities is real and is greater than ever before, so in this budget, I pledge to increase that overall grant fund by a further forty thousand pounds for 25/26; an increase of over fourteen percent. This is New Forest District Council doing what it does best, going above and beyond in the delivery of non-statutory services that make a real difference to the New Forest community.

For many members in this chamber this evening, this will be the first time you have the responsibility to agree the Council's budget on behalf of your constituents. It is a responsibility that shouldn't be taken lightly. Decisions taken in the setting of the budget this evening don't just impact the next 12 months, decisions taken expand well beyond that. Members of this chamber are presented with a budget that is able to invest in Council services for the short, medium and long term. And it is a budget that begins to align our services to our newly emerging corporate plan, delivering for people, place and prosperity within the New Forest.

I give thanks to our wonderful staff who have got us here, to those who will fulfil our fully funded aspirations, and I fully support the Housing Revenue Account, General Fund and Council Tax recommendations as proposed.