

Liberal Democrat Budget Speech 2024

The Conservative budget and post-election financial decisions shows they have learned nothing. The underlying attitude of our council has remained unchanged for over two decades. The Conservative administration, once again at the helm, has failed to learn that doing nothing extra for council tax payers is not how to run a good council.

Looking at end of year out-turns for the last 7 years a pattern emerges. With the exception of one year necessitating a £400,000 top-up, the council consistently budgeted for one figure yet ended up with a significant surplus. This year we will have a £1.97million surplus, a 9.64% reduction on the figure they set in their budget. One could be forgiven for asking the question: are these surpluses a result of a deliberate strategy to accumulate funds or just financial incompetence. These funds originate from the General Fund, financed by council taxpayers to support local services.

So what are they going to do with this surplus? In their budget planning this year, beyond the costs associated with running the authority, what is there for New Forest residents? It does contain £130,000 on naval gazing strategies, such as £50,000 for a strategy for car parks. I am sure any of our residents paying over the odds for parking clocks would be happy to advise the council for free.

Councillors, I maintain faith in our capable officers. Instead of squandering public funds on external consultants, let's leverage our in-house expertise, reserving exceptions for critical tasks like the Local Plan review, so essential for aligning our planning strategies with current needs.

Instead of Tory taking, let us talk about giving, We Liberal Democrats want to see greater use of targeted funding to help those in need and to improve the lives of all our residents.

Economic growth for our local district is as important to our local economy as it is for the national economy. I do not hear anything from our Conservative administration about growing our local economy beyond their wild dreams of the Freeport without any data, facts and the reality of what our residents would get from this venture.

We need a sustainable local economy based upon current and new local thriving businesses with a flourishing Tourist Industry. Therefore we see the economic viability of the district as a priority for the council to focus on. In our budget we propose helping business by extending business rate relief encouraging businesses to use the empty shops in our communities.

NFDC to refocus its commercial strategy to promote multi-purpose units in each of our main settlements. Encourage start-ups by providing office or work space at a reasonable rent along with Council tax breaks. To boost support for tourism we propose having a Tourism coordinator – working directly with Town and Parish Councils, tourism operators and Local History Groups to develop the tourism

infrastructure. In addition producing a self-funding Tourist App help making decisions on where to go easier for visitors to our beautiful district.

Along with that we want to explore new initiatives like promoting street vending Kitchens, where NFDC can encourage start-ups by providing strategic locations at a market rent for potential users to rent, and begin to advertise their presence and encourage the development of a greater variety of food outlets

An essential part of wellbeing is feeling safe in our communities with increasing crime in our district bringing with it an increasing fear of crime. We need to be doing more than just setting up a few extra cameras. We propose a Feasibility study of funding in partnership with Town and Parish council for an ACSO service-repurposing some of the £300,000 CCTV funding service, which can proactively prevent criminal acts by dealing with the low level incidents thus releasing police time to focus on more crime prevention activities.

Helping the young with their wellbeing not only can reduce antisocial behaviour but help them develop positive futures. Therefore engage with HCC and other partners and provide funding for more youth and family hubs, with focus on school holidays, and activities funded throughout the District.

In the 22/23 figures, amongst our New Forest school age children there are 19% on free school meals compared to 18.3% across the county and 18.8% across the South East region. These figures equate to 4,022 children being in poverty. This has risen by 337 children since I brought this to the council attention last year and the Conservative administration refused to do anything. We Liberal Democrats do not believe in standing idly by as our young people suffer. We propose in working with other agencies and providing a grant contribution of £500,000 aimed at reducing child poverty in the New Forest District (£250k over two years).

We have declared a climate and nature emergency. From solar panel installations to incentivising green practices, we must lead by example in combating climate change and preserving our environment. To that end we propose a Feasibility study into putting covered solar panels in NFDC car parks to generate electricity for charging electric vehicles and sell excess power to subsidise car parking costs. This is something that is already happening in other European countries, we should not be falling behind on the green agenda.

Sustainability especially in a time of economic hardship has to be planned and measured, many people are still suffering in the cost of living crisis. Inflation may have dropped but food prices in the shops are still much higher than before as are energy costs and of course ex Conservative prime minister Liz Truss's gift to the nation of higher interest rates. We believe we should reduce the price of parking clock costs to the inflation only level of October 2023 plus any 2024 inflation level increase so they pay for themselves but give something back to the New Forest's hard pressed motorists, who so often have to bear the burden of being a conservative local government's cash cow. We would reduce the long stay clock from £220 to £155, the quarterly long stay clock from £65 to £44 and the short stay

clock from £40 to £33 figures based upon inflation rather than greed as the 2023 rise was based upon.

Art and culture assist in the creation of wellbeing so while the current administration has overseen the demise in the arts in much of the district. We want to bring art and culture back to our communities so we would create Arts Hub/Creative spaces. Develop and formalise the Arts Advocate scheme working to have representatives in each community with local arts and performance venue representation, starting with a 1 year pilot scheme to see how it could take off.

Housing and Homelessness issues should not be as prevalent as they are in our district. The new Local Plan should encourage developers to secure more Housing sites for diverse housing needs and be more proactive in securing public building sites for Housing such as Police Stations.

Now members we can help our communities directly with our community grants so we propose an enhanced budget for NFDC Councillor community grants to be raised to £1200 per member. This would be funded by the savings from the reduction to 48 councillors. To increase incoming revenue we propose to rent out office space at Appletree Court Lyndhurst created by more flexible and hybrid working and look to sell buildings not required in the future..

Our district, apart from being one of the geographically largest in the country, contains diverse communities, from Hythe to Ringwood, Totton to Hyde where one size solutions do not fit it all. We propose to investigate the setting up of Citizen Assemblies, asking participants to look at 3 key topics each year, all relevant to the New Forest District and the communities we serve.

Now, how would we fund it? The administration has been squirreling money away before into reserves, which takes us back to the surpluses or positive variation in modern council speak, surpluses.

The bottom line of course is that none of our proposals negatively impacts the council's finances or the medium term financial plan excepting a reduction in the money going into the capital fund from the general fund, which would potentially bring borrowing year forward to 2027. However as we have huge surpluses each year that would no doubt negate that fact going forward and the benefit for New Forest people now make doing that worthwhile.

We as councillors are elected not only to represent our local residents but to work to improve their quality of life to make our district a great and safe place to live, work and visit. In these challenging times we need to consider this even more and our budget is to help the local economy with helpful initiatives, reduce costs for local people, ideas to make them safer and support the young and improve wellbeing.

Our budget is for a Fairer New Forest, which gives to New Forest people, please support this budget.