

**COUNCIL 22 FEBRUARY 2016**

**LEADER OF THE COUNCIL – BUDGET SPEECH**

“Challenge and Change”

This is my first budget speech of the new administration and my theme is “Challenge and Change”.

Last May the New Forest residents trusted the conservatives with a magnificent mandate to continue to run New Forest District Council. With 58 out of 60 councillors elected, our best ever majority. I believe this was because of our well planned long term view of running the council, with a positive honest approach with sound financial management. I urge all councillors long standing or newly elected to observe our manifesto and its pledges in conjunction with the corporate plan as we go forward. We are all here because we recognise that we face a challenge and there is a need for change.

We are all well aware of the significant financial challenges. We have managed our way through the last few years very successfully and been able to balance the budget and deliver no increase in Council Tax for six consecutive years. This has been a tremendous achievement. However, looking forward, the continued scale of reductions in government grant leave us with no option if we wish to ensure our community is provided with valued and quality services. This we have thought long and hard over but for this next year we will ask our local taxpayers to meet an increase. The government expect us to increase Council Tax by £5 at Band D, but our good housekeeping and financial management mean that for 2016/17 we will only increase our Council Tax at Band D by £2.60. In our Manifesto we said we would keep down Council Tax. I believe our increase of only 5p per week for our services helps deliver our promise to council taxpayers who face sizeable increases from others this year.

One thing that I will not change is that there will be no last minute gimmicks, despite the government changes we have only recently received. We will keep planning our way forward and delivering what we say we will. With this in mind, at the last Cabinet we shared our areas for review and asked for our financial strategy to be revisited early in the year to allow all members to contribute to what we need to do to meet the challenge ahead. Our reviews need to be approached with an open mind to what is right for the New Forest and helps us meet our challenges. Despite what some of you may have read, we have not reached any outcomes yet. We will undertake reviews in an open and transparent way that engages with our staff, customers and members.

Within our Senior Management we have seen much change. David Yates after 16 years left the Council as Chief Executive. He made a huge contribution to the success of the Council during his time and I wish him an enjoyable retirement. Amongst other senior managers to have left the Council recently are John Mascal, Martin Devine, Annie Righton and Ken Connolly and next month Glynne Miles will also be leaving. All of these managers made a big contribution to the work of the Council and I wish to thank them for all they did and, on behalf of all members of the Council, I wish them all the best for the future whether it be in retirement or some new venture.

Bob Jackson became our new Chief Executive and has commenced the process of change that is needed. The new Executive Team is in place and they are well down the road to appointing a new group of senior managers that will lead the council management forward over the next few years. This is a lot of change, but not only is it needed to meet the financial challenge, it has brought with it an energy and enthusiasm that will help us meet the

challenges that lie ahead. As Cabinet, we will continue to work closely with the new senior management team.

The special and unique nature of what makes the New Forest what it is, I believe has been clearly identified within our Corporate Plan and we will deliver on what is important to our residents and businesses.

The importance of growing a more prosperous New Forest remains our key priority. We have put tremendous effort into supporting our local economy and maintaining its vibrancy.

In November New Forest Business Partnership celebrated the 10<sup>th</sup> annual New Forest Brilliance in Business Awards. From the eight category winners, Green Close Hotels (who own Careys Manor & Montagu Arms Hotels) were announced as the New Forest Business of the Year. NFBP's membership has doubled over the past 12 months and their ever growing events calendar has provided even more support for local New Forest businesses.

In early December the 2016 Brand New Forest Card was launched during Small Business Saturday at Ringwood's Christmas Fair. At the event, the town also celebrated its award as Brand New Forest Town of the Year 2016. BNF Card sales have already exceeded 4000 with nearly 300 businesses providing card offers.

In February, NFDC and a variety of local tourism businesses worked together to deliver a New Forest presence at the Daily Telegraph Outdoor Show 2016 at Excel, London. This stand display was twice the size of 2015 and over 2000 visitors signed up to the New Forest consumer database which now measures over 30,000.

The provision of affordable homes remains a key objective for us. Last year we were one of only two councils in the Country that has maintained its housing stock at the same size i.e. we have managed to replace the homes that we have sold under Right to Buy. We are now starting to build significant numbers of new homes (e.g. at North Milton) and there are more affordable housing development opportunities in the pipeline.

As we review our local plan the need for more housing will become a challenge. This is a national challenge as there is a national shortage. I believe we all locally accept that we will in future see more housing. This will be a significant change and we will need to work closely with our local communities to deliver what is both needed and acceptable.

We continue to deliver for our community through the provision of services which are needed. Our weekly Refuse Collection services remains very valued, our Health & Leisure Centres are popular with over 1.6 million visitors and the tenants within our 5,000 Council homes continue to be very satisfied as demonstrated by satisfaction surveys. Our Housing finances are in good shape because we've invested in our stock (with 99% of homes meeting the decent homes standard) and we've improved rent collections and reduced void turnaround times. The way we have progressed the reconstruction of the Beach Huts at Milford is another example of us working with our local communities to deliver real outcomes that work.

Our Corporate Plan also recognises the need we have to work with others. This we will continue to do and specific areas like the Community Safety Partnership are being refreshed. In addition, our everyday relationships with Towns and Parishes and neighbouring Councils are important to us and we will look to build on all of these. I should mention the Devolution of Hampshire and IOW bid. We have supported our neighbours in a responsible way but have made no commitments.

One of the best highlights of the year is the Volunteers evening hosted by the Chairman. This year was no exception. The opportunity to speak and hear the stories of what so many individuals do to support others within our community is a tremendous experience and something I would wish to see celebrated more.

Challenges are a way of life for the Council and our ability to be able to change and overcome them is our challenge and I believe the Budget as presented is another step along that path. My grateful thanks to all councillors, staff, cabinet members and our new chief executive in getting us to this point. I commend the Budget to you.