

Liberal Democrat Alternative Budget Speech 2026/27

Chairman, Members, this is the last budget in which NFDC has total control, it is the last budget we can make a difference for our residents before the Shadow Authority exerts its legal control over our finances. It is our final opportunity to leave a practical, positive legacy for our residents, the old, the young, the vulnerable, and our local businesses. These are not in place of the administration's budget. They are targeted, affordable additions designed to improve quality of life across the District aligned to our Corporate Plan.

Our New Forest District contains some of the least privileged parts of Hampshire. 22.1% of New Forest School children are on Free school meals, and many will be disadvantaged, which impacts academic outcomes. The New Forest district is higher than the Hampshire average (20.7%) and the South East (20.6%). Since 2021, that figure has risen by 5.9%. There are now 4,512 children in poverty in our district — 266 more than last year when the LibDems also called for targeted help and you did nothing..

That is one in five New Forest school age children live in poverty, one in five!

Alongside this we see rising school exclusions, increasing suspensions, and more referrals to Hampshire Children's Services, with more children entering care. This is the trajectory of our district and it demands our attention. In our Corporate Plan that prioritises People, Place and Prosperity in Priority 1 in the People section "Helping those in our community with the greatest need". If this description does not fit as some of our most vulnerable residents, who does it fit?

Therefore, the Liberal Democrats propose working with New Forest Local Children's Partnership, and Hampshire County Council to support sustainable programmes for families.

Hampshire County Council have confirmed there are plans to roll out Best Start hubs in the New Forest, it will likely be in the second or third phase, so probably the summer. The teams are reviewing the data in line with the DfE requirements.

There is a significant opportunity to enhance District services by integrating Housing Support, into the New Forest Best Start Hub. By embedding these services on a sustainable and long-term basis, the hub can provide holistic assistance to families and individuals in need, addressing multiple aspects of wellbeing and stability within our community. This £500,000 start-up funding will be dedicated to supporting the establishment and early operations of the Best Start Hub, ensuring that vital services like Housing Support are accessible for families from the outset and can be sustained for the future to help the children of our district ad revers that trend.

Our support for the young is to set up of more youth hubs, with a focus on school holidays, providing meal and activity funding throughout the District. £50,000 would be for ongoing to support provided for the youth of our district.

This is delivering for young through early intervention, it is not just morally right but it reduces long-term financial and social costs for the whole community as well.

But although the children of our district are our future, the current adult population also need our help.

Corporate Plan People Priority 2 “Empowering our residents to live healthy, connected and fulfilling lives

Almost a third of our residents - 31.7% - are over 65, and 5.2% are over 85. The retired community tend to have greatest need of public transport and are the biggest users of hospital services - and yet many communities have no direct public transport to Southampton or Lymington hospitals. So, we propose working in partnership with Town and Parish Councils to change that situation. This Council would purchase and forward fund for 12 months a “Health Bus” to Lymington/Southampton hospitals. Seed capital of 120,000 for the purchase of a bus and 12 months supporting revenue budget by NFDC, subject to being revenue funded by town and parishes thereafter.

Our residents have also faced rising prices for energy and fuel. Our GP practices tell us that cold weather increases chest infections, blood pressure and risks of heart attack and stroke, particularly for our most vulnerable residents.

We propose a £1 million capital Warm Spaces Grant Programme, delivered in partnership with Town and Parish Councils, to create additional community spaces that are energy-efficient and can be used as warm hubs for the community, in addition ensure NFDC community facilities also provide warm space areas where appropriate.

This is preventative public health policy, modest borrowing with measurable social return This one-off capital grant will not just benefit the old but also the vulnerable and those who have trouble warming their homes

Corporate Plan Prosperity Priority 2 “Supporting our high-quality business base and economic centres to thrive and grow”. We know that the engine driving life in the New Forest is employment, and across our unique landscape many of the business are based in the heart of our communities, particularly on our high streets. Our towns and villages depend on small businesses providing vital products and services for residents, a place to meet, and for many, the first taste of employment

Liberal Democrats propose the introduction of extended business rate relief to encourage businesses to purchase and use empty shops in our communities thus supporting local employment/economy. This ongoing revenue support of £100,000 will help grow and sustain the small businesses in our towns and villages, the bedrock of the local economy

A commissioned review into the economic impact of town centre car parking charges, forming a future Parking Strategy ahead of Local Government Reorganisation. We need evidence-based policy to protect the sustainability of our town centres.

The Liberal Democrats are a party who put people first, but we are also fiscally responsible. £770,000 from Corporate Priorities reserve instead of using that for the

Public Convenience refurbishment, which is then covered by the capital allocation to Public Conveniences. The ongoing £150,000 does not negatively affect the Medium Term Financial Plan and £1 million capital expenditure for the warm places is a sum worth borrowing for the positive impact on New Forest residents and compared to our existing £132.9 million debt this extra £1million would not realistically effect the overall financial situation.

With reference to the risk assessment Uncertainty exists in every budget cycle. The Administration's own papers acknowledge short- and medium-term uncertainty in reference to the current budget. That cannot be a reason for inaction.

The key point from our 151 officer is, I quote, "It is the view of the Council's Section 151 Officer that the changes as proposed are not of material consequence to the section 25 statement as included within the substantive proposed budget report"

These additions align fully with the Corporate Plan. They do not disrupt the Administration's budget. They strengthen it. They are innovative, constructive and fiscally sound.

They support children in poverty, provide access to healthcare for older residents, protect vulnerable households from cold, and help our town centres thrive.

This is our final opportunity to act before control passes to the Shadow Authority. It is our final opportunity to show our residents that we have their interests at heart. It is our final opportunity to invest in the New Forest for the benefit of our taxpayers before our finances become controlled from outside of this District.

Let us leave a positive legacy.

Please support these recommendations.