

Place and Sustainability Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Thursday 12th March 2026

Draft New Forest Economic Development Strategy 2026–2030

Purpose	For Decision
Classification	Public
Executive Summary	<p>This report presents a Draft New Forest Economic Development Strategy 2026–2030, which sets out a proposed approach for the council to adopt in supporting a vibrant, inclusive and resilient economy. The Strategy seeks to respond to significant demographic, environmental and economic challenges while seeking to maximise major opportunities linked to the Solent Freeport, green technologies, skills growth, and town centre regeneration.</p> <p>The Panel are asked to provide feedback and comment prior to it being considered for formal adoption in June at Cabinet and at council in July.</p>
Recommendation(s)	<p>That Place and Sustainability Overview and Scrutiny Panel:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. provide feedback on the Draft New Forest Economic Development Strategy 2026–2030, as set out in Appendix 1, and2. subject to further revision to incorporate appropriate feedback from the Panel and focussed consultation, support the Strategy being considered for final approval at Cabinet and Council
Reasons for recommendation(s)	<p>The Draft Strategy proposes a comprehensive framework to help support sustainable and inclusive economic growth, delivering the council’s prosperity priorities, responding proactively to major opportunities including the Solent Freeport and strengthening the council’s</p>

	position when seeking external funding and working with strategic partners.
Ward(s)	All
Portfolio Holder(s)	Councillor Derek Tipp – Planning and Economy
Strategic Director(s)	Tracey Coleman – Interim Strategic Director for Place, Operations and Sustainability
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Introduction and background

1. The New Forest faces a unique combination of demographic pressures, environmental constraints, and emerging economic opportunities. The district has an ageing and declining working-age population, high housing costs, limited transport connectivity and digital challenges.
2. At the same time, economic strengths and opportunities include the intrinsic attraction and value of the New Forest as a place, its port and marine economy, renewed visitor economy, rising levels of higher-level qualifications, growth in the green energy sector, and significant potential arising from the Solent Freeport and port-related land at Dibden Bay and Marchwood.
3. Hampshire County Council’s Economic Profile (2025) highlights that the local economy is valued at £6.4bn, supports 84,000 jobs, and contains 7,820 enterprises, but faces challenges including productivity below the UK average and underrepresentation of knowledge-intensive sectors.
4. The previous Economic Development Strategy which covered the period from 2018 – 2023 required extensive updating to reflect newly available data, shifts in economic trends and changing local, regional and national priorities.
5. This Draft Strategy has been developed to respond to these challenges and opportunities, deliver on Corporate Plan priorities, and guide economic aspects of the Local Plan Review. A review of the previous economic development strategy was required to identify changes in terms of economic structure, business base, productivity and skills. An analysis has also been undertaken of the latest regional

and local economic development data to provide a strong evidence base for future delivery.

Strategic priorities of the Draft Economic Development Strategy

6. The Draft Strategy sets out six priorities:

- **Championing key growth sectors** (tourism, port & logistics, marine, agriculture & forestry, green tech, creative industries);
- **Accelerating the low carbon transition**, including supporting businesses to reduce emissions and promoting sustainable transport;
- **Developing skills for the future**, including implementation of the New Forest Skills Action Plan 2025–30, a focus on digital skills, and targeted support for priority groups;
- **Revitalising town centres** through regeneration, masterplanning and CIL funded projects (Totton, Ringwood, Lymington, Milford on Sea);
- **Unlocking investment through strategic partnerships**, particularly with Solent Freeport, ABP, HCC, NFNPA and the Hampshire Prosperity Partnership; and
- **Fostering enterprise and innovation**, including supporting SMEs, encouraging start-ups, regulatory improvements, and access to funding.

7. The Draft Strategy goes on to propose a series of actions and measures which would be monitored for their implementation through annual reporting.

Corporate Plan priorities

8. The Draft Strategy would directly support the Prosperity theme of the Corporate Plan, specifically:

- Maximising the benefits of inclusive economic growth and investment.
- Supporting a high-quality business base and economic centres.
- Championing skills and access to job opportunities.

9. It also has the potential to contribute to the People and Place themes through skills delivery, sustainable transport, regeneration and environmental improvement.

Options appraisal

10. Three options have been identified in relation to preparing the Draft Economic Development Strategy.

Option 1 – Approve the Draft Strategy for consultation (Recommended)

- Proposes a clear, evidence-based framework for economic development activity.
- Sets out a draft strategy to supports inward investment, partnership working, funding bids and policy development.
- Would position the council to respond effectively to strategic opportunities including Freeport growth and port development.

Option 2 – Do Nothing

- Would leave the council without a coherent economic development framework.
- Weakens ability to maximise benefits from strategic developments or secure external investment.
- Risks fragmentation of activity and reduced alignment with Corporate Plan and Local Plan Review.

Option 3 – Produce a Narrower or Sector Limited Strategy

- Rejected because economic challenges and opportunities are interdependent and require a coordinated, district-wide approach.

Consultation undertaken

11. In preparing the Draft Strategy, officers have been mindful of the work of key partners including the County Council, National Park Authority, established New Forest business networks, education providers and the Freeport. A focussed consultation is being undertaken with these key partners and is due to close after the agenda papers have been circulated.
12. Initial feedback received indicates strong support for the emerging strategy. Key partners welcome its clear direction, alignment with regional priorities, and practical focus on delivery. The proposed emphasis on partnership working, small and medium enterprise support, skills, sustainability and place-based growth has been observed as timely and well-judged.
13. There is particular support for recognising the importance of small businesses, and for including priorities such as green growth, digital connectivity and town centre revitalisation. Overall, the feedback received to date indicates that the emerging strategy is a coherent, forward looking plan, and partners are keen to work with the council to help deliver it.

14. Any further feedback received will be reported at the meeting of the Panel, along with any officer comments in response. The Draft Strategy will be updated to consider any changes arising from this consultation, and the feedback of the Panel, prior to a final version being anticipated to be considered for formal approval by Cabinet on 3rd June 2026, followed by council on 13 July 2026.

Financial and resource implications

15. The preparation, including consultation of this draft Strategy, is to be funded from existing budgets and resourced within the Economic Development team.
16. Implementation of the Strategy, once finalised, will require ongoing engagement with external funding opportunities (e.g. Freeport retained rates, Hampshire Prosperity Partnership calls, government grants).
17. Some regeneration projects are already supported by approved CIL allocations. Any future bids will follow appropriate governance processes.

Legal implications

18. There are no direct legal implications arising from preparing and consulting upon the strategy.

Risk assessment

19. No formal risk assessment is required for this report. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that key risks for the final strategy include:
 - failure to secure external funding which may slow delivery.
 - Infrastructure constraints (transport, utilities) could limit growth without partner cooperation.
 - Environmental constraints may restrict land availability.
20. Mitigation includes partnership working, clear monitoring, alignment with Local Plan Review, and early engagement with statutory bodies.

Environmental / Climate and nature implications

21. The Draft Strategy supports the council's climate and nature emergency commitments. Actions include promoting low-carbon mobility, supporting green technologies, and strengthening low-carbon design and construction skills. Regeneration proposals incorporate sustainable transport and public realm improvements.

Equalities implications

22. The Draft Strategy promotes inclusive growth and targets support for groups with greater barriers to employment: women returners, NEETs, people aged 50+, job changers and aspiring entrepreneurs.

Crime and disorder implications

23. None directly

Data protection / Information governance / ICT implications

24. No direct implications

New Forest National Park / Cranborne Chase National Landscape implications

25. A significant proportion of the district lies within or adjacent to the New Forest National Park and partly within the Cranborne Chase National Landscape. The Draft Strategy supports sustainable tourism, employment and land use patterns that respect environmental constraints and enhance natural capital. No adverse impact on National Landscape objectives is anticipated.

Conclusion

26. The Draft New Forest Economic Development Strategy sets out a timely and strategic response to the district's economic challenges and opportunities. It aligns strongly with the Corporate Plan and supports effective delivery of the Local Plan Review, regeneration, climate objectives and skills initiatives.
27. Subject to feedback from this Panel and the focussed consultation with key partners, it is expected that finalising and adopting the Strategy will enable coordinated implementation and strengthen the district's capacity to secure investment and sustainable economic growth.

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – New Forest Economic Development Strategy 2026–2030

Background Papers:

Economic Profile 2025 - [NFDC Economic Profile_Dec-25.docx](#)