

26 FEBRUARY 2026

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the New Forest District Council held on Thursday, 26 February 2026

- * Cllr John Sleep (Chairman)
- * Cllr Dave Penny (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors:

- * John Adams
- * Alan Alvey
- * Peter Armstrong
- * Geoffrey Blunden
- Hilary Brand
- * Mark Clark
- Steve Clarke
- * Jill Cleary
- * Kate Crisell
- * Sean Cullen
- * Jack Davies
- * Steve Davies
- * Philip Dowd
- Barry Dunning
- * Jacqui England
- * Richard Frampton
- * Allan Glass
- * David Harrison
- * Matthew Hartmann
- * David Hawkins
- John Haywood
- * Jeremy Heron
- * Nigel Linford

Councillors:

- * Patrick Mballa
- * Colm McCarthy
- * David Millar
- * Ian Murray
- * Stephanie Osborne
- * Alan O'Sullivan
- * Adam Parker
- * Neville Penman
- * Dan Poole
- * Caroline Rackham
- * Alvin Reid
- * Joe Reilly
- * Janet Richards
- * Barry Rickman
- * Steve Rippon-Swaine
- * Michael Thierry
- * Derek Tipp
- * Neil Tungate
- * Alex Wade
- * Malcolm Wade
- * Christine Ward
- * Phil Woods
- Richard Young

*Present

Officers Attending:

Kate Ryan, Alan Bethune, Tim Guymer, Richard Knott, Daniel Reynafarje, Karen Wardle and Matt Wisdom

Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Brand, S Clarke, Haywood and Young.

62 MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 15 December 2025, be confirmed.

63 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

All Members of the Council had been granted the necessary dispensations to speak and vote on the Scheme of Members' Allowances, the annual budget and setting of the Council tax for 2026/27, considered at minute no 70, 71 and 72.

Cllr A Wade declared, for transparency purposes, his employment by Hampshire and Isle of Wight Fire and Rescue Authority, a precepting authority in respect of the overall level of Council tax, considered at minute no 72.

Cllr J Davies declared, for transparency purposes, his employment by a taxi operator, subject to the Licensing Fees and Charges 2026/27, considered at minute no 66.

64 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman reported on the civic engagements he had attended throughout the District and Hampshire as follows:

15 January

The Chairman had the honour of representing the district at the official opening ceremony by Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal of the new SMART Centre South Coast Institute of Technology at Southampton Solent University.

18 January

The Chairman had attended an event at the Blue Apple Theatre in Winchester (part of the Minstead Trust), which had great performances from the large team of actors and singers with learning disabilities, who form part of the Hanger Farm Community Theatre group, based in Totton.

27 January

The Vice-Chairman had represented the district at the Mayor of Havant's Holocaust Memorial Day commemoration. The service was focused on "Bridging Generations" and led by Honorary Alderman Ms. Leah Turner. Cllr Penny reported that this provided a very moving account of life before, during and after the Holocaust.

29 January

The Chairman had visited Tools for Reliance, based in Netley Marsh, where he was given a tour of the facilities and had the opportunity to meet some of the volunteers. The organisation supported training facilities across Africa, as well as supplying tool kits for armed forces veterans retraining for jobs in the community.

2 February

The Leader and Chairman had attended the funeral with full military honours of the armed forces veteran Jim Justice. This was a very well supported event with many armed forces officers attending. A great service, and a special and well deserved send off.

The Chairman had also represented the district at the New Forest Disability AGM which was well supported by their volunteers, officers, and residents.

11 February

The Chairman had attended the East Hants Civic Day held at Treloar School and College. This was a massive development for 180 disabled young people providing sensory and educational development.

14 February

The official opening of Merceode Lodge Care Home in Marchwood, had been attended by the Chairman where he had the privilege of cutting the ribbon. A guided tour was provided by the Managing Director, Tim Buckley of the very impressive state-of-the-art complex.

21 February

The Chairman had attended the Town Mayor of New Milton's charity afternoon tea party, which raised vital funds for the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Air Ambulance.

19 April - Civic Service

Finally, the Chairman reported he would be holding his Civic Service on Sunday, 19 April at 3pm at St Wins Church, Totton. He invited members to this important event and advised that an invitation would be sent out via email in the next week.

65 LEADER'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

There were no Leader's announcements.

66 LICENSING FEES AND CHARGES 2026/27

Cllr J Davies declared, for transparency purposes his employment by a taxi operator.

Cllr Tungate introduced the report and moved the recommendations from the General Purposes and Licensing Committee meeting held on 9 January 2026. Cllr Reid seconded the motion.

RESOLVED:

That Council:

1. Approved the proposed fees and charges for the financial year 2026-27 as set out in Appendices 1 and 2; and
2. That the power to set the scale of fees and charges for Hackey Carriage and Private Hire Licensing, including to consider the objections made in respect of the proposed, fees, be delegated to the General Purposes and Licensing Committee.

67 TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY 2026/27

Cllr Alvey introduced the report and moved the recommendations from the Audit Committee meeting held on 13 February 2026. Cllr O'Sullivan seconded the motion.

RESOLVED:

That Council approved:

1. the Treasury Management Strategy 2026/27 to 2028/29 including the Annual Treasury Management Investment Strategy for 2026/27 (and the remainder of 2025/26), and the Treasury Indicators contained within, as provided in Appendix 1 be approved; and
2. that authority is delegated to the Section 151 Officer, who in turn delegates to Hampshire County Council's Director of Corporate Operations, as agreed in the Service Level Agreement, to manage all Council investments and borrowing according to the Treasury Management Strategy Statement as appropriate.

68 INVESTMENT STRATEGY 2026/27

Cllr Alvey introduced the report and moved the recommendations from the Audit Committee meeting held on 13 February 2026. Cllr O'Sullivan seconded the motion.

RESOLVED:

That the Investment Strategy 2026/27 provided at Appendix 1, be approved.

69 PAY POLICY STATEMENT 2026/27

Cllr Cleary introduced the report and moved the recommendations from the HR Committee meeting held on 8 January 2026. Cllr S Davies seconded the motion.

RESOLVED:

That Council approved:

1. the changes outlined to Bands 1 and 2 with effect from 1 April 2026; and
2. the Pay Policy Statement 2026/27

70 REPORT OF CABINET - 4 FEBRUARY 2026**PART I – ITEMS RESOLVED BY CABINET****Item 1 – Corporate peer challenge feedback visit final report**

A councillor highlighted that there was a recommendation within the report was to consider ways to improve the scrutiny function. It was felt that improvements should be considered which would be for the benefit of residents and the future decisions made by the council. The Leader responded noting this comment.

Item 2 – Local Plan Review – Approval of spatial options and policy direction document

A councillor noted that at the Cabinet meeting, the Leader had implored residents and stakeholders to respond to the consultation. The residents of Fordingbridge, in particular, were keen to express their views, but had reported of experiencing

difficulties in completing the online consultation form. It was asked whether any additional support or communication could be provided to assist those who wanted to respond to the consultation in order to make their views known.

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy acknowledged that the online form required an account to be created in order for comments to be submitted. It was possible to save the response, part way through and return to it at a later point. The Portfolio Holder reported he would pass this feedback to officers.

Item 3 – Draft New Forest creative and cultural framework

A councillor welcomed the draft creative and cultural framework and congratulated officers on its production, recognising the hard work involved. It was noted that the work arising from the framework would need to take place in partnership with others and this was supported. It was recognised that there were good quality cultural organisations operating in the forest but that they needed monetary support. It was felt that a budget needed to be identified in order to assist in bringing cultural events to fruition.

One other member also expressed support for towards the draft framework and expressed the view that it would open up funding opportunities.

The Portfolio Holder for Community, Safety and Wellbeing reported he was pleased to see the approval of draft framework. He noted the comment regarding funding had been raised at the Cabinet meeting and responded to by the officer in attendance. He reported that the framework would help with simplifying the process in applying for funding and that it would benefit the residents of the New Forest.

PART II – RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNCIL

Item 6 – Financial Monitoring report (based on performance April – December 2025 inclusive)

A councillor noted that the report cited a security incident which had occurred at Hardley depot and questioned whether there would be an opportunity to be given more detail at a future meeting. This was so members could be provided with some reassurance that measures had been put in place to mitigate against this happening again, including at other council depots and also recognising that there was a financial impact.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate reported that the incident was a great concern and confirmed that the security arrangements had been improved as well as measures to mitigate against the risk of a future recurrence.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate introduced the report and moved the adoption of the recommendation. Cllr S Davies seconded the motion.

A councillor welcomed the funding in respect of Eling Tide Mill. The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate responded and hoped that working with the Town Council, there now was a long-term programme in place to ensure that it would remain as an operational Tide Mill.

RESOLVED:

That the General Fund Corporate Priority Reserve is increased by £1.296 million.

Item 7 – Asset maintenance and replacement programme and General Fund capital programme 2026/27

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate introduced the report and moved the adoption of the recommendation. Cllr S Davies seconded the motion.

A councillor sought confirmation that the vehicle replacement programme included the vehicles required in order to deliver the roll-out of phase 3 of the waste service. Another member highlighted that there was a significant number of redundant vehicles being stored at Lymington Town Hall waiting to be auctioned off. It was felt that they were there for too long time and were an eyesore.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate responded to the points made and confirmed that the vehicle replacement programme had been developed to include all vehicles required for the new waste service. He also agreed that the redundant vehicles stored at the Lymington Town Hall should be managed as efficiently and effectively as possible.

RESOLVED:

That the Vehicle and Plant replacement programme be approved for a 2-year period, covering purchases due in 2026/27 and 2027/28.

Item 8 – Capital Strategy 2026/27

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate introduced the report and moved the adoption of the recommendation. Cllr S Davies seconded the motion.

RESOLVED:

That the Capital Strategy 2026/27 be approved, including the adoption of the Minimum Revenue Payment (MRP) statement.

Item 9 – Members' allowances – Scheme to apply from 1 April 2026

The Leader introduced the item and moved the adoption of the recommendations. Cllr S Davies seconded the motion.

RESOLVED:

That the current scheme of members' allowances be made as the scheme to apply from 1 April 2026.

71 REPORT OF CABINET - 18 FEBRUARY 2026**PART I – ITEMS RESOLVED BY CABINET**

There were no items resolved by Cabinet in this report.

PART II – RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNCIL**Item 1 – Housing Revenue Account Budget and Housing Public Sector Capital Expenditure Programme 2026/27**

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness introduced the item and moved the adoption of the recommendations. Cllr Cleary seconded the motion.

The motion was put to a recorded vote, the outcome of which was as follows:

Voting for: Cllrs Adams, Alvey, Armstrong, Blunden, M Clark, Cleary, Crisell, Cullen, J Davies, S Davies, Dowd, England, Frampton, Glass, Harrison, Hartmann, Hawkins, Heron, Linford, Mballa, McCarthy, Millar, Murray, Osborne, O'Sullivan, Parker, Penman, Penny, Poole, Rackham, Reid, Reilly, Richards, Rickman, Rippon-Swaine, Sleep, Thierry, Tipp, Tungate, A Wade, M Wade, Ward and Woods

Voting against: None

Abstaining: None

The recommendations were carried, 43 in favour, 0 against, 0 abstaining.

RESOLVED:

1. that from 06 April 2026, an increase in dwelling rents of 4.8% from the 2025/26 weekly rent level, in accordance with Government guidelines, be agreed;
2. that from 06 April 2026, an increase in garage rents of 4.8% from the 2025/26 weekly rent level be agreed;
3. that from 06 April 2026, shared ownership property rents be increased in line with the applicable rent review provisions within each lease. For the eight properties held under leases allowing RPI+0.5%, an increase of 5.00% from the 2025/26 weekly rent level be agreed, for all properties which are subject to CPI+1% under the current model lease, an increase of 4.8% be agreed and the weekly rent of one property sold under previous legislation be agreed to increase by 4.8%;
4. that from 06 April 2026 Service Charges will continue to reflect actual charges;
5. that the HRA budget, as set out in Appendix 1 of the Cabinet report, be agreed; and
6. that a Housing Capital Programme to 2028/29, as set out in Appendix 4 to the Cabinet report, be agreed.

Item 2 – Medium Term Financial Plan and Annual Budget 2026/27

The Chairman used his discretion to allow the Leader of the Council and the leader of the opposition groups only to exceed the time limit for speeches, for making their budget speeches. He highlighted his intention to attempt to facilitate one budget debate on the recommendations from Cabinet and any single alternative proposal, also at his discretion. However, should more than one amendment be tabled, he indicated that these would be dealt with one at a time.

The Leader of the Council introduced the item and moved the recommendations as proposed in the report of the Cabinet dated 18 February 2025. She also made a statement on the budget, a copy of which is attached to these minutes. Cllr S Davies seconded the motion.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group made a statement and moved an amendment in the form of an alternative budget. Cllr Millar seconded the amendment.

A copy of the alternative budget had been circulated to all Members and published as part of the supplementary council agenda. A copy of the statement made is attached to these minutes.

The Council debated the Cabinet's budget proposals together with the alternative budget.

The outcome of the recorded vote on the alternative budget was as follows:-

Voting for: Cllrs M Clark, Cullen, J Davies, Dowd, Harrison, Mballa, McCarthy, Millar, Osborne, Parker, Rackham, A Wade, M Wade and Woods

Voting against: Cllrs Adams, Alvey, Blunden, Cleary, Crisell, S Davies, Frampton, Glass, Hartmann, Hawkins, Heron, Linford, Murray, O'Sullivan, Penman, Penny, Poole, Reid, Reilly, Rickman, Rippon-Swaine, Sleep, Thierry, Tipp, Tungate, Ward

Abstaining: Cllr Armstrong, England and Richards

The alternative budget was lost, 14 in favour, 26 against, 3 abstaining.

The outcome of the recorded vote on the budget as outlined in the report of Cabinet, was as follows:

Voting for: Cllrs Adams, Alvey, Blunden, Cleary, Crisell, J Davies, S Davies, Dowd, Frampton, Glass, Hartmann, Hawkins, Heron, Linford, Murray, O'Sullivan, Penman, Penny, Poole, Reid, Reilly, Rickman, Rippon-Swaine, Sleep, Thierry, Tipp, Tungate, Ward

Voting against: Cllr M Clark, Cullen, Harrison, Mballa, McCarthy, Millar, Osborne, Parker, Rackham, A Wade, M Wade and Woods

Abstaining: Cllrs Armstrong, England and Richards

The substantive motion and budget as presented in the report of Cabinet was carried 28 in favour, 12 against, 3 abstaining.

RESOLVED:

1. the updated Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and financial strategy, as set out in the Cabinet report and throughout appendices 1-3, be approved;
2. there is a General Fund Net Budget Requirement in 2026/27 of £26.630 million, as set out in appendices 5a - 5d to the Cabinet report;
3. the New Forest District Council Band D Council Tax for 2026/27 shall be £211.92 (paragraph 37 of the Cabinet report);

4. the General Fund Capital Programme for 2026/27 of £14.646 million, as set out in appendix 6 to the Cabinet report be approved; and
5. the proposed fees and charges as included at appendix 7 to the Cabinet report be approved.

Item 3 – Lymington and Pennington Neighbourhood Plan – Making the Plan (Referendum and Decision on Adoption)

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy introduced the item and moved the adoption of the recommendations. Cllr S Davies seconded the motion.

A number of councillors spoke in support of the adoption of Lymington and Pennington Neighbourhood Plan, recognising that the referendum turn-out rate had been positive. Members highlighted that the adoption of the Plan would enable the Town Council to receive additional CIL funding which would be of benefit to the local area and to local residents.

RESOLVED:

1. That the outcome of the referendum of 29 January 2026 be noted; and
2. That the Lymington and Pennington Neighbourhood Plan be 'made' (adopted) as part of the Development Plan for New Forest District (Outside the National Park).

72 THE 2026/27 COUNCIL TAX

All Members of the Council had been granted dispensations to speak and vote on this item.

Cllr A Wade declared, for transparency purposes, his employment by Hampshire and Isle of Wight Fire and Rescue Authority, a precepting authority in respect of the overall level of Council tax.

The Council considered the Council Tax for 2026/27.

The Portfolio Holder Finance and Corporate moved the recommendations in the report. Cllr S Davies seconded the motion.

The recommendations were put to a recorded vote, the outcome of which was as follows:-

Voting for: Cllrs Adams, Alvey, Armstrong, Blunden, M Clark, Cleary, Crisell, Cullen, S Davies, Dowd, England, Frampton, Glass, Hartmann, Hawkins, Heron, Linford, Mballa, McCarthy, Millar, Murray, Osborne, O'Sullivan, Parker, Penman, Penny, Poole, Rackham, Reid, Reilly, Richards, Rickman, Rippon-Swaine, Sleep, Thierry, Tipp, Tungate, A Wade, M Wade, Ward and Woods

Voting against: None

Abstaining: Cllr J Davies and Harrison

The recommendations were carried, 41 in favour, 0 against, 2 abstaining.

RESOLVED:

The Council resolved the following:

1. That it be noted that on 3 December 2025 the Council calculated the Council Tax Base for the year 2026/27, as set out in paragraph 19 of the Council report;
2. To calculate that the Council Tax requirement for the Council's own purposes for 2026/27 (excluding Parish Precepts) is £15,746,890;
3. That the amounts be calculated for the year 2026/27 in accordance with Sections 31A, 31B and 34 to 36 of the Local Government and Finance Act 1992 as amended by the Localism Act 2011, as set out in paragraph 21 of the Council report;
4. That it be noted that Hampshire County Council (including Adult Social Care), the Police and Crime Commissioner for Hampshire and Isle of Wight and the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Fire and Rescue Service have issued precepts for 2026/27 to the Council in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, for each category of dwellings in the Council's areas as set out in paragraph 22 of the Council report;
5. That the Section 151 Officer be given delegated authority to implement any variation to the overall level of Council Tax arising from the final notification of the Hampshire County Council precept; and
6. That, having calculated the aggregate in each case of the amounts at paragraph 21(h) and 22, the Council, in accordance with Section 30 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 (as amended by the Localism Act 2011), hereby sets the amounts of Council Tax for the year 2026/27 for each part of its area and for each of the categories of dwellings, as set out in paragraph 24 of the Council report.

73 QUESTIONS

Questions were put and answered under Standing Order 22, as follows:

- From Cllr Brand to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Blunden, on the food waste collection service for phase 3 residents.
- From Cllr M Clark to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy, Cllr Tipp, on the number of conservation officers.
- From Cllr Millar to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy, Cllr Tipp, on flooding risk and mitigation.
- From Cllr A Wade to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Blunden, on assisted collection for the new waste collection service.
- From Cllr Haywood to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy, Cllr Tipp, on neighbourhood plan policies.
- From Cllr M Clark to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy, Cllr Tipp, on Hythe Pier repairs.
- From Cllr Haywood to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Blunden, on vermin infestations.

Note: A copy of the full questions and replies are attached to these minutes.

74 APPOINTMENT OF THE STRATEGIC DIRECTOR HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES - REPORT OF THE MEMBER APPOINTMENT PANEL

The Leader of the Council moved the recommendation in the report. Cllr S Davies seconded the motion.

RESOLVED:

That Sophie Sajic be appointed Strategic Director, Housing and Communities.

75 AMENDMENT TO THE CONSTITUTION - PROCEDURE FOR REMOVING AND REPLACING THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Cllr S Davies introduced the item and moved the recommendations. Cllr M Wade seconded the motion.

RESOLVED:

That the amendments to Chapter 4/5 (Procedure for Removing and Replacing the Leader of the Council) (Appendix 1) be approved which:

1. Removes the automatic trigger, following a change in political balance; and
2. Clarifies the provisions for bringing forward a motion to remove the Leader, inclusive of a new threshold of at least one third of the total number of council members.

76 MEMBERSHIP OF COMMITTEES AND PANELS

There were no changes.

CHAIRMAN

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Leader Budget Speech 2026/27

I am delighted to present the Council's balanced budget for 2026/27. Once again it is a budget that continues to invest in our services, invest in our assets, invest in our people and invest in our place.

At the highest level, it is a general fund revenue budget set at twenty six point six million pounds, and a general fund capital programme totalling fourteen point seven million pounds.

At a time when local government finances are tighter than ever, especially following on from what has turned out to be a rather unfair funding review by the current government, I am proud to be able to confirm that no frontline or back-office services will be reduced for the year ahead. We have produced a fully funded balanced budget that gives us an excellent platform to tackle the difficult medium term position current being forecast.

In our budget, Councillors will note the additional two million pounds put into our new waste collection service. We have demonstrated the Council's values perfectly in this roll out, demonstrating Learning as we entered into phase 2 and now phase 3, Empathy, as we have listened to our residents and offered additional support where required, Ambition is clear with this being the single largest service change that I can ever recall for this Council, and Fairness, especially for our hard working crews who no longer have to worry every time they grab a bin bag that something sharp or heavy might cause them an injury.

We have listened to what our residents have told us, and through our transformation and ICT work programme have improved self-service functionality so our customers can carry out transactions at a time that suits them.

We have increased the coastal maintenance budget for 2026/27 by seventy seven thousand pounds to a total of four hundred thousand pounds so we can continue to be a responsible local authority and seek to do all we can to protect our stunning coastline from the continued threats of coastal erosion and climate change. We must fully recognise however that we simply can't do this alone. We will keep up engagement with the Environment Agency who will need to play a significant role in funding the multi-million pounds required over the more medium-long term.

An additional sixty one thousand pounds has gone into toilet cleaning. Yes, it's not glamorous or headline grabbing, but couple this with the two million over the next two years in our capital programme for toilet renovations, it's another great example of prioritising our resources in projects and services that will be of real benefit to the largest proportion of our residents and visitors alike.

We are investing nearly three million pounds next year in replacement vehicles critical to frontend service delivery, and have half a million pounds set aside next year for necessary improvement and maintenance works to the historically important

Eling Tide Mill. A report will also be coming forward to the Council in the early summer to set out our intentions around the delivery of strategic CIL projects. When combined with our annual infrastructure programme, habitat mitigation schemes and budget set aside for Arts and Culture projects, we have over twenty million pounds of projects funded through CIL within our three year capital programme. We care about the place that is the new forest, and want to see money that has been collected here, spent here.

We have also invested in our biggest asset, our staff who do such a brilliant job at providing the front end of customer interaction and satisfaction, and just as importantly, we can't forget the range of staff who provide the often unseen functions that simply keep us going. In line with the People Strategy, this budget is supporting the Digital Skills for All Programme launching this year, and we have increased the training budget for our staff to ensure they remain as well prepared as they can be to take the essence and culture of the New Forest into the new Council, post April 2028.

A clear priority of ours is also to try and keep council tax increases as low as possible. We have done our bit and have imposed by far the lowest Council Tax percentage increase of all the precepting authorities on the Council Tax bill. It's easy to forget that this council's council tax share only equates to around nine per cent of the overall bill. We play an important role in collecting the council tax for the County Council, the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Police and Crime Commissioner, the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Fire and Rescue service, and the Town and Parish Councils. Our share for the year at two hundred and eleven pounds and ninety two pence for a band D property continues to represent excellent value for money at just four pounds per week.

Outside of the General Fund, our Housing Revenue Account, funded in the main through Housing Rents, is also balanced, and will spend in excess of nineteen million pounds next year on improving and maintaining the five thousand two hundred and fifty homes that we own.

The opposition will claim that we should be doing more, that we must take the opportunity to spend more whilst we can. Let me tell you, we are doing absolutely everything we can to prioritise our resources and our spend to where it is needed the most on the services that this Council has responsibility for. The budget is in accordance with priorities that have been collectively set by all members of this chamber.

And, even with Local Government Reorganisation around the corner, the residents of the New Forest will still need a responsible and financially sustainable local authority beyond March twenty twenty-eight. That is what you get with a budget set by a Conservative administration.

I'm extremely thankful to my Cabinet, to the members who have supported them, and to our officers for getting us to this position.

Chairman, I fully endorse the recommendations as laid out in the report of the Cabinet.

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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.

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Council – 26 February 2026

Questions Under Standing Order 22

First Questions

Question 1

From Cllr Hilary Brand to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Geoffrey Blunden

We have been informed that the Wheelie bin roll out for Phase 3 has been delayed until May 2026 due to wheelie bin manufacturing schedules. Does this include a delay to the food waste collection?

Reply:

Yes.

Note: This question was dealt with in writing in the absence of Cllr Brand.

Question 2

From Cllr Mark Clark to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy, Cllr Derek Tipp

How many conservation officers did we have five years ago and how many now?

Reply:

Five years ago, there were two conservation officers in post. Today, we continue to have two conservation officers.

Question 3

From Cllr David Millar to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy, Cllr Derek Tipp

Storm Chandra struck on 26 January, and since then sustained rainfall has left many parts of our district flooded, roads impassable, farmland waterlogged and businesses disrupted. In Fordingbridge, residents have again experienced how vulnerable the town is to prolonged rainfall – for many, this is the fourth or fifth ‘100 year event’ they have lived through in the last 25 years.

At the Local Plan meeting on Friday 13th, around 250 residents braved the conditions hoping to gain assurance as to how this council's potential allocation of almost 3,000 new homes in and around Fordingbridge would avoid worsening flood risk and bringing more infrastructure pressure.

Given the very real concerns raised by residents, can you confirm that the Council will:

1. Ensure that flood mitigation and infrastructure are designed and delivered in advance of or alongside any future development;
2. Take the lead on identifying projects which will mitigate the impact of building on farmland and flood plains across the Avon valley; and
3. Use NFDC's strategic Community Infrastructure Levy to guarantee that existing and future residents of Fordingbridge are not left living in demonstrably worse conditions just so that this Council might meet Government housing targets?

Reply:

Let me assure you that the Local Plan does take flood risk and infrastructure capacity extremely seriously.

I can confirm that any future development would only proceed where robust flood mitigation is designed into schemes from the outset and delivered in step with the development. This is a requirement of national policy, and it will be a clear expectation in our plan-making.

We are already working with partners such as the Environment Agency and Hampshire County Council to understand what wider mitigation projects are needed across the Avon Valley.

Part of the Local plan process is to identify those strategic measures and the council will play a key role in coordinating that work. Regarding infrastructure funding, the Community Infrastructure Levy is one of the main funding streams to support areas experiencing growth.

As the local plan progresses, we will ensure that the needs of Fordingbridge are properly considered when CIL is prioritised. At this stage, no decisions have been made on the strategic allocations for the local plan.

Question 4

From Cllr Alex Wade to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Geoffrey Blunden

Please can you confirm in the Phase 3 area how many properties have requested assisted collections for the new waste collection service, and what per cent have we rejected? And, what consideration are we giving to Resident challenges on medical waste additional requirements?

Reply:

In January our 'Get Ready' leaflets were posted out to 36,000 households in the phase 3 area, and by 24th February, there were 63 applications for assisted collections received. All of these have been accepted as the applicants met the requirements.

Regarding medical waste requirements, our collection policy is clear that additional waste capacity can be made available in this situation. Members of the public can request this larger capacity online, or by calling our customer service team.

In response to a supplemental question, seeking clarification whether there was a deadline for submission of assisted collection requests, the Portfolio Holder reported that it was an ongoing process and therefore there was no deadline.

Question 5

From Cllr John Haywood to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy, Cllr Derek Tipp

A number of parishes in the district now have Neighbourhood Plans. Neighbourhood Plans represent the end point of years of effort, a large part of it done by volunteers. People who are passionate about their area freely give their time to shape its development at a very local level, supported by planning professionals.

Neighbourhood plans are the only part of the district's local plan that have a direct democratic basis through a local referendum, and once made, they become an integral part of the local plan itself. Congratulations by the way to Lymington and Pennington for the clear "Yes" in their Neighbourhood Plan referendum.

In Ringwood we are becoming frustrated by the number of times that neighbourhood plan policies are being over-ridden by this council in planning decisions.

Can I ask the portfolio holder: in how many planning decisions have neighbourhood plan policies been over-ridden by this council in the past year?

Reply:

Six planning applications have been considered by the Planning Committee since January 2025 where a conflict with a Neighbourhood Plan has been identified. Despite these occasional conflicts, the Neighbourhood Plans still have influence over development in many ways.

A Neighbourhood Plan, once adopted, becomes part of the Council's overall Development Plan, along with the Local Plan and the Hampshire County Council Mineral and Waste Plan.

These plans contain many policies and some of these may, on occasions conflict with one another. In that case on an individual application, it is up to the decision maker, such as the Planning Committee, to weigh up the relevant policies and decide where the balance lies. In other words, to make a planning judgment.

Finally, I would like to confirm that the Council welcomes the production of Neighbourhood Plans, and we will continue to assist local planning groups to prepare sound plans. I too would like to congratulate Lymington and Pennington on the successful referendum on their plan.

Note: This question was dealt with in writing in the absence of Cllr Haywood.

Second questions

Question 6

From Cllr Mark Clark to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy, Cllr Derek Tipp

Can the Council consider issuing a Section 48 Notice to the Owner of the Hythe Pier to effect immediate repairs to the structure given the Ferry business is now up for sale and the public would wish to see the return of the Ferry service to a sound and safe landing stage?

Reply:

Thank you, Councillor Clark, for your question.

Under the Planning Listed Buildings and Conservation Area Act 1990 legislation, a Section 48 Repairs Notice can only require works that are reasonably necessary for the proper preservation of the listed structure. If the repairs in question relate to the pontoon rather than the listed pier structure, it is doubtful as to whether the Council could legally serve such a notice.

If you would like to explore the matter further, particularly in terms of what is or is not included within the listing and what powers may be available, I would encourage you to speak directly with our conservation officers, who will be happy to advise.

In response to a supplemental question, where Cllr Clark clarified that the concern related to the pier, rather than the pontoon, and that electrical issues on the pier work was preventing residents from accessing to the inscribed boards of their loved ones and whether anything could be done given its Grade II listed status, the Portfolio Holder reported that he would pass this matter onto the Conservation Officer to consider.

Question 7

From Cllr John Haywood to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Geoffrey Blunden

A number of residents have approached me with concerns about vermin infestations in their gardens and homes being caused by the council's new food waste collection service.

Can I ask the portfolio holder if the council has seen an increase in reports of vermin across the district since the roll-out, and if any investigations into the impact of the new food waste collection service on vermin infestations have been made?

Reply:

The council has no evidence that there is an increase in vermin infestations being caused by food waste collections. In fact, reports to the Council's own pest control service have fallen by 130 cases in the last year, as the caddies have clearly contributed to more secure way of storing food waste than the plastic bags previously used, with reports of street litter on collection days almost eradicated.

Note: This question was dealt with in writing in the absence of Cllr Haywood.

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