

Members we stand at the threshold of the most pivotal change in local governance in our lifetimes. The transition to a unitary authority is not just an administrative change, it is a fundamental shift in how we deliver services, allocate resources, and define the priorities that will shape our communities for years to come. This is not about party politics; this is about leadership, vision, responsibility and accountability to the people we serve. The decisions we make now will echo into the future, and we cannot afford for their sakes to let this moment pass without action. The Conservative administration has been cautious with finances, and while fiscal prudence is important, there is a difference between being cautious and being unprepared. When we move into unitary governance, decisions will be made about priorities and services for the New Forest area, which will no longer be made in this chamber and debated by its members. If we do not act now to set the agenda for investment in our district, we risk being overlooked when resources are redistributed across a much larger population. The new authority will not inherit just our budgets, it will inherit our priorities. We must make those priorities clear now for the residents of our district.

We can work to make the transition to unitary government an opportunity if we use it wisely. The councils that take the lead in setting up pilot programs, proving feasibility, and demonstrating community impact will be the ones that shape the policies of the new authority. If we do nothing, our local priorities risk being lost. But if we lead now, our district can be at the forefront of shaping the policies and investments of the unitary government from day one.

This is the focus in our budget, to improve wellbeing across the district, support local businesses and help those that need assistance. We want to encourage green initiatives and enhance our communities' environments.

Liberal Democrats want to support local businesses more. We propose NFDC refocusing its commercial strategy to promote multi-purpose units in our main settlements with facilities including superfast broadband, office space at a reasonable rent and extended business rate relief to encourage the purchase and use of empty shops. Economic resilience is not something that happens by accident, it is the result of planning, innovation, and forward-thinking policy. NFDC to allocate resources to produce a Digital Economy Strategy for the district so we can benefit from the business and art opportunities it would bring to our area.

Encourage Green Energy production with Business rate relief incentives. Ensure the New Forest is ready to compete in this new environment. Let us not forget Tourism is a corner stone of the district's local economy we

propose looking at innovative ways to support tourism like a self-funding Tourist App high lighting the many tourist venues and experiences in our area.

The economic landscape of the New Forest is changing, and with the shift to a unitary authority, we must ensure that there is access to digital infrastructure, flexible workspaces. Delivering a level of support to promote current and future growth.

We want to improve access to art and culture in our communities to help wellbeing by creating Arts Hub/Creative spaces and include a transient art and culture hub such as an arts bus, to move around the district. In addition, formalising the Arts Advocate scheme to have a representative in each community with local arts and performance venue representation.

We have an aging population with 29.8% over the age of 65, many of which are much older and need to be able to get to health centres if they cannot drive but we have no practical public transport links to Lymington or Southampton hospitals .So we propose working in partnership with Towns and Parish Council to provide a "health bus service" to Lymington/Southampton hospitals. NFDC to provide the seed capital of £50k to purchase the first bus and work with local councils to produce sustainable revenue costs plan to be funded by T&P's councils thereafter.

We want to help our youth too supporting them develop into the citizens of the New Forest of tomorrow, by setting up Youth Hubs, engaging with HCC and other partners to provide funding for more youth and family hubs, focusing on school holidays, with meal and activity funding throughout District.

In the 23/24 figures, amongst our New Forest school age children there are 20.4% on free school meals compared to 19.4% across the county and 19.7% across the Southeast region. These figures equate to 4250 children being in poverty. This has risen by 224 children since I brought this to the council's attention last year and the Conservative admiration did not respond. Since 2021 the number of children in poverty in our district has grown by 802, We can still make a difference and prevent further growth in child poverty because the Liberal Democrats propose NFDC working with other agencies such as HCC,CAB, the Food Foundation The Handy Trust and other local charities providing a grant contribution of £500,000 aimed at stopping the increase and reducing child poverty in the New Forest District (£250k over two years).

Strong communities are built on stability. When families struggle with poverty, when young people lack opportunities, and when older residents cannot access health services, the cost is not just social, it is economic. These pressures translate into increased demand for services, lower workforce participation, and a reduced quality of life that affects everyone. Our proposals are more than just supporting the vulnerable; they are about making smart, proactive investments that reduce long-term costs and create a more resilient, self-sufficient community.

In the last election we reduced our number of councillors from 60 to 48 saving allowances, expenses and community grant funding. Hampshire County Council has its own councillor community grant scheme on hold pending a review. So many local organisations will lose out on this vital source of funding, so we propose an enhanced budget for NFDC Councillor community grants to be raised to £1200 per member.

Housing and Homelessness issues should not be as high as they are in our district, with a large number of New Forest families on the Housing waiting list. Therefore, Liberal Democrats propose to raise the Housing acquisition budget. to £50m over 3 years, from the administrations £45m per year.

We have only to watch the news to see the impact of climate change getting worse. We never want to see New Forest residents becoming the victims of nature. We need to continue to act for future generations of New Forest residents. We propose a feasibility study into turning sections of NFDC car parks into covered solar panelled parking bays to generate electricity for charging electric vehicles selling the excess power to subsidise carparking costs. Another step by this council of cost-effective green actions towards a more economically sustainable environmental future.

Many of our areas suffer from fly tipping and whilst the campaign by the Liberal Democrats to save the Hampshire County Council Recycling Centres drew cross party support to keep them open. We need to plan for the future, the outcomes of the local government organisation is unclear. We need measures to protect our communities from increased fly tipping and a strategy to deal with side waste, the excess waste, which will not go in the wheelie bin. Therefore we propose having Community skips in our main communities as have been successfully introduced in other councils for excess waste, side waste and a legal alternative to fly tipping.

The Liberal Democrats are committed to democracy and listening to our residents not just through surveys, but by engagement to really hear

what they want us to do. Our district, the geographically largest in the county, contains diverse communities, where one size solutions do not fit it all. We propose following the successful introduction across the country in many local authorities 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.

None of our proposals negatively impacts the council's finances or the medium-term financial plan. To reassure members on the financial aspects of this budget they will be paid for using £1.079m of the revenue budget, which was going to be transferred into the Capital Budget. In the officer's report it states, "The level of additional borrowing required to backfill the capital programme financing would not be at a level that would likely cause a significant detrimental short-, medium- or long-term effect." It is also worth remembering over the last 8 years every year but one have had significant underspends along with sums of extra money from the government/interest rates improvements etc, in the last budget outturn 23/24 the unbudgeted income amounted to £3.52m. Our Capital spend of that year was a final spend of £8 million from a 15 then 13 million spend plan leaving £4.693 million rephased into future years man and savings of £1, 029 million. So financially we are able to make these improvements.

We as councillors are elected not only to represent our residents but to work to improve their quality of life and to make our district a great and safe place to live, work and visit.

The challenge we face is bigger than any one council, any one budget, or any one political party. We are making decisions today that will shape future of governance of the New Forest. If we do not act now, if we do not set clear priorities, secure funding, and establish a framework for the new authority then those decisions will be made for us, without us. We choose to lead by putting together a budget that helps fortify our district for the governance challenges ahead and improve things for New Forest Residents.