



# Annual performance report

2024 to 2025



## Leader's foreword

As we take this opportunity to reflect on the past year, we pass a significant milestone for our council, the end of our 50th year of operation since the council's formation in April 1974. We celebrated this achievement with our stand at the New Forest Show in July last year, also using this occasion to officially launch our new Corporate Plan 2024-28.

Our longevity stands as a testament to our collective dedication and commitment to serving our communities. As we recognise our achievements, we embark on a new chapter in our journey in preparing for local government reorganisation (LGR), and we remain focused on delivering high-quality services, driving economic growth and improving the lives of our residents.

The past year has not been without its challenges, LGR, the wider devolution agenda, and the potential changes these will bring to us cannot be ignored. However, we are determined to navigate these changes positively, engaging with the process and working collectively with all councils in Hampshire and the Solent to support the creation of a new Mayoral strategic authority, and develop a proposal for local government reorganisation which protects our district's best interests.

In December we welcomed the Corporate Peer Challenge team from the Local Government Association (LGA). A group of peers facilitated discussion with our officers, elected members

and partners focusing on key issues for the organisation to gain valuable insight. A report was published by the LGA following the completion of the review outlining recommendations, which we have developed into an action plan. Delivery of these actions will be carefully monitored, and reporting will be integrated in our regular performance reporting cycles. The challenge reaffirmed our transformation and improvement journey but highlighted a need to focus our efforts to ensure meaningful progress towards our priorities.

The corporate peer challenge and ongoing LGR discussions have prompted a review of council priorities to ensure our ambitions are balanced with our capacity and focused on the right outcomes. These revised priorities have been approved by our overview and scrutiny panels and cabinet members. The corporate plan sets out these ambitions for the future built around 3 key priorities:

- people
- place
- prosperity

These are underpinned by our realigned transformation programme, 'Future New Forest'.

This report is the first annual reflection on the progress we have made in these key priority areas, showcasing our achievements, whilst recommending areas where we should focus on improvement.

As we look forward, we are committed to embracing the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead, continuing to modernise how we operate, exploring new technologies and ways of working to improve our services, enhance our customers' experience and put us in the best place possible for the future.

**Cllr Jill Cleary**

Leader of New Forest District Council

## 2024/2025 Performance Summary

KPIs are rated RAG (Red, Amber, Green) according to the performance against target.

■ On target or above target

■ Below and up to 10% deviation from the lower threshold of the target

■ Over 10% deviation from the lower threshold of the target

■ KPI marked TBC due to lag in data availability, context and an estimated data availability is provided in these cases.

■ KPI marked N/A due to performance being outside of our direct control and influence, or data not being collected during period.

| PEOPLE | ID | KPI Name                                                                                       | RAG                                                |                |   |
|--------|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|----------------|---|
|        | 1  | Percentage of homelessness duty cases successfully prevented                                   | <span style="background-color: yellow;"></span>    |                |   |
|        | 2  | Number of households in external emergency accommodation                                       | <span style="background-color: yellow;"></span>    |                |   |
|        | 3  | Number of families with children under 16 in external emergency shared accommodation over 6wks | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     |                |   |
|        | 4  | Number of Appletree careline services provided to customers                                    | <span style="background-color: yellow;"></span>    |                |   |
|        | 5  | Resident perception that their quality of life is affected by the fear of crime                | <span style="background-color: lightgrey;"></span> |                |   |
|        | 6  | Resident perception that they feel safe when outside in their local area                       | <span style="background-color: lightgrey;"></span> |                |   |
|        | 7  | Investment in and rollout of public space CCTV system                                          | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     |                |   |
|        | 8  | Number of education and awareness sessions in relation to serious crime                        | <span style="background-color: lightgrey;"></span> |                |   |
|        | 9  | Number of positive interventions in response to Public Spaces Protection Orders (1 and 2)      | <span style="background-color: lightgrey;"></span> |                |   |
|        | 10 | Number of cultural events and activities supported by New Forest District Council              | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     |                |   |
|        | 11 | Number of social housing homes delivered by NFDC and its partners                              | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     | <b>Summary</b> |   |
|        | 12 | Number of affordable council homes delivered against the 2026 target set                       | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     | RED            | 0 |
|        | 13 | Percentage score for the overall tenant satisfaction with the Council as a landlord (TSMs)     | <span style="background-color: lightgrey;"></span> | AMBER          | 3 |
|        | 14 | Number of council homes achieving Energy Performance Certification band C                      | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     | GREEN          | 7 |
|        | 15 | Percentage scores for the 5 safety and compliance management (TSMs)                            | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     | TBC            | 0 |
|        |    |                                                                                                |                                                    | N/A            | 5 |

| PLACE | ID | KPI Name                                                                                         | RAG                                                |                |   |
|-------|----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|----------------|---|
|       | 16 | Percentage of major planning applications determined in time                                     | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     |                |   |
|       | 17 | Percentage of minor planning applications determined in time                                     | <span style="background-color: yellow;"></span>    |                |   |
|       | 18 | Percentage of other planning applications determined in time                                     | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     |                |   |
|       | 19 | Percentage of allowed planning appeals                                                           | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     |                |   |
|       | 20 | The total outstanding net dwelling supply as set out in our development plan                     | <span style="background-color: yellow;"></span>    |                |   |
|       | 21 | Kilogrammes of non-recycled waste produced per household                                         | <span style="background-color: yellow;"></span>    |                |   |
|       | 22 | Households using our chargeable garden waste service as a percentage of total properties in NFDC | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     | <b>Summary</b> |   |
|       | 23 | Emissions from the council's vehicle fleet                                                       | <span style="background-color: lightgrey;"></span> | RED            | 0 |
|       | 24 | Percentage of household waste sent for recycling                                                 | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     | AMBER          | 1 |
|       | 25 | Number of fly-tipping incidents per 1,000 people                                                 | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     | GREEN          | 6 |
|       | 26 | Percentage customer satisfaction with the appearance of their local area                         | <span style="background-color: lightgrey;"></span> | TBC            | 3 |
|       | 27 | Equivalent number of 0.5 litre bottles filled at water-filling stations – waste averted          | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     | N/A            | 2 |

| PROSPERITY | ID | KPI Name                                                                                | RAG                                                |                |   |
|------------|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|----------------|---|
|            | 28 | Squared metres of industrial/employment land developed                                  | <span style="background-color: yellow;"></span>    | <b>Summary</b> |   |
|            | 29 | Level (£) of retained business rates (at source)                                        | <span style="background-color: lightgrey;"></span> | RED            | 0 |
|            | 30 | Resident perception of our highstreets and town centres                                 | <span style="background-color: lightgrey;"></span> | AMBER          | 0 |
|            | 31 | Vacancies of retail premises within town/local centres                                  | <span style="background-color: yellow;"></span>    | GREEN          | 0 |
|            | 32 | Employment rate percentage of working age adults (aged 16-64)                           | <span style="background-color: yellow;"></span>    | TBC            | 3 |
|            | 33 | Proportion (in percentage terms) of employee jobs with hourly pay below the living wage | <span style="background-color: lightgrey;"></span> | N/A            | 3 |

| FUTURE NEW FOREST | ID | KPI Name                                                                   | RAG                                                |                |   |
|-------------------|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|----------------|---|
|                   | 34 | Resident satisfaction with Council services                                | <span style="background-color: lightgrey;"></span> |                |   |
|                   | 35 | Staff satisfaction score with NFDC ICT services                            | <span style="background-color: lightgrey;"></span> |                |   |
|                   | 36 | Resident satisfaction score with the quality of NFDC digital services      | <span style="background-color: lightgrey;"></span> |                |   |
|                   | 37 | Percentage of vacancies filled first time                                  | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     |                |   |
|                   | 38 | Percentage staff turnover                                                  | <span style="background-color: red;"></span>       |                |   |
|                   | 39 | Average number of days sickness absence per employee                       | <span style="background-color: yellow;"></span>    |                |   |
|                   | 40 | Number of council apprenticeships                                          | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     |                |   |
|                   | 41 | Percentage variance to Council budget +/- (General fund budget variations) | <span style="background-color: yellow;"></span>    |                |   |
|                   | 42 | Percentage variance to Housing Revenue budget +/- (HRA budget variations)  | <span style="background-color: yellow;"></span>    |                |   |
|                   | 43 | Percentage of Council Tax collected in year                                | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     | <b>Summary</b> |   |
|                   | 44 | Percentage of Non-domestic Rates collected in year                         | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     | RED            | 1 |
|                   | 45 | Benefit realisation from ICT investment                                    | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     | AMBER          | 1 |
|                   | 46 | Percentage of ICT incidents resolved within SLA                            | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     | GREEN          | 8 |
|                   | 47 | Percentage of annual ICT work programme delivered on time and on budget    | <span style="background-color: lightgrey;"></span> | TBC            | 3 |
|                   | 48 | Percentage unscheduled downtime for critical systems                       | <span style="background-color: green;"></span>     | N/A            | 2 |



Council members outside St Georges Hall, Calshot

## People

### Helping those in greatest need

This year, a community project at St George's Hall, Calshot, was launched to refurbish and create a community space in one of our more isolated communities. Collaborating with Fawley Parish Council, Hampshire County Council (HCC) Public Health, the local youth club, the 17 Port and Maritime Regiment, and village residents, renovations were completed in October, followed by a public opening event. The hall now includes a larger kitchen and main hall, cinema room, and accessible toilet. The aim of the project was to provide a warm and welcoming facility for the local community to meet, and in partnership with Fawley Parish Council support greater youth involvement and attract services to use the hall as a community hub in future. The project was partly funded by the Government through the Rural England Prosperity Fund, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, and the Contain Outbreak Management Fund.

In 2024/25, we supported 17 initiatives through our revised community grants scheme, awarding £130,000 in revenue and £96,040 in capital grants. The funding went towards a range of community interest projects including creative learning activities, supported living for vulnerable adults, support for young carers, residents with

a disability, those experiencing homelessness or mental health concerns, and sports and leisure, and arts and cultural provisions, with the aim of improving the lives of our more vulnerable residents, supporting our valued voluntary networks to have more security over the long term, and creating opportunities to interact with wider wellbeing initiatives and growing economic development opportunities. Beneficiaries included local charitable organisations, and various local councils and clubs. Additionally, £51,100 in community transport grants were given in partnership with HCC and Community First Wessex. For the 2025/6 budget, a total of over £274,000 in capital, revenue and community transport grant funding has been approved.

As part of the Household Support Fund we distributed £90,000 this year, to 305 households who were struggling financially, and distributed £401,835 in food vouchers to over 8,000 households who were in receipt of Council Tax Support and Housing Benefit, with the aim of tackling food and fuel poverty.

Partnering with the voluntary sector remains a priority, ensuring support for vulnerable households and those in need. We chair a bi-monthly New Forest Partnership Meeting, bringing together various organisations to



Ringwood Town Football Club pitch

share information and collaborate on projects. This includes working with and supporting local foodbanks, weekly food larders, and 5 community hubs as part of a cost-of-living steering group with officers regularly attending, as well as a disability charity who support hospital discharges, and take up of home adaptations and disability benefits.

Work has continued towards the rollout of universal credit to eligible residents receiving certain benefits. To date 2,013 eligible New Forest residents have been migrated on to universal credit, and our team from our revenues and benefits service have provided signposting, additional support and escalation of specific cases to the DWP to ensure that our residents in greatest need are supported through this process.

### **Empowering our residents to live healthy, connected and fulfilling lives**

A new football facility was opened in Ringwood this year following significant financial contribution from the council including £535,000 in developer contributions and CIL funding. The full scheme (costing a total of £3.4m) includes a club house, pitch facilities and changing rooms. It was officially opened in November 2024 with an event which was attended by our leader, Cllr Jill Cleary. We continue to support this project

through the Ringwood Town Football Facility steering group. Working with Ringwood Town Council, AFC Bournemouth Community Sports Trust to ensure development outcomes are met for the benefit of the town and its residents.

Additionally, £120,000 was provided for a new 3G sports pitch at Testwood School in Totton, enhancing existing facilities for the school and, for the first time, wider community use by local sports clubs, which provide superb facilities for expansion and by reducing travel requirements improves accessibility.

The contracted delivery of 5 council-owned leisure centres continued, with an annual update in September reporting an increase of over 1,700 health and fitness memberships. This year saw utilisation of swimming lessons rising to around 79% of class places filled. Participation in 'healthy communities' sessions, where participants have been referred by their GP, saw a 2,600 increase in uptake.

To help grow the cultural sector to improve access to cultural activities, a New Forest Cultural Development Board was formed, bringing together creative industry partners to focus on creative and cultural development. We facilitated a number of community engagement sessions this year attracting over 150 attendees, an artist and poet were in residence at these sessions,



D Day commemoration, Lyndhurst

and were able to meet with local councillors, young people, local residents and members from the local professional arts and cultural collective Folio.

Local artists from SPUDworks in Sway created an art piece titled 'Anthropogenic Nest, Effects on Nature Caused by Humans' as part of our Look Out for Our Forest project. The piece was launched at the New Forest Show in July and toured the district, visiting town centres to generate interest and discussion within the community about climate and nature sustainability and how we protect our unique environment.

Reflecting our commitment to supporting our varied communities, work has been undertaken towards a revised and updated Armed Forces Covenant. This important document, first signed in 2013 with the armed forces community of HQ Solent Station at Marchwood, outlines the support we provide to those who are or have served in the armed forces, and their families. To better promote this available support, a suite of webpages has been developed, detailing assistance in housing, healthcare, education, employment and community integration, upholding the principles of the covenant and ensuring the armed forces community is treated fairly and with respect. The covenant will be signed by the Council and with the armed forces community in Autumn 2025.

### Meeting housing needs

In response to our strategic priority of returning empty homes in the district back into use, this year, 12 privately owned empty homes were reintegrated into use as part of the empty homes strategy, addressing private sector housing needs and enhancing neighbourhood quality. Contractors cleared homes and gardens, and we engaged with property owners to support them to resolve issues.

In the final year of our Homelessness Strategy rough sleeping in the district reached an 8-year low, with only 1 to 2 individuals identified sleeping rough on any given night. This reduction highlights the effectiveness of our strategy and wider partnerships. Support for rough sleeping in Hythe is delivered in partnership with The Crossings charity.

In response to our commitment to delivering more affordable, and greener, housing our latest affordable housing development at Moore Close, New Milton, saw 6 apartments and 10 houses, including 5 shared ownership properties, completed in January 2025. Built to high energy efficiency standards with features like extra thermal insulation, triple glazing, photovoltaic roof panels, and air source heat pump technology. Each property includes a fitted kitchen, two parking spaces with electric vehicle charging points, and a private garden.



Housing services are preparing for the regulator's new consumer standards, using them to improve services and outcomes for tenants. Although 99% of the council's 5,200 homes meet the current decent home standard, we are not complacent and long-term investment plans are in place to modernise and future-proof housing stock.

This year saw the development of a new Landlord Strategy, drawing on the achievement of our landlord services and setting out the future aims of the service. The strategy aims to continue to provide secure, safe, warm, and affordable homes for our tenants, whilst delivering and building new affordable homes that will benefit our future communities, tenants, leaseholders, the economy, and our environment.

Members and officers want to improve the effectiveness of Tenant Engagement and a new Strategy was approved, setting priorities of listening to tenants, putting tenants first, knowing tenants and supporting engagement, and improving communication. These priorities were co-created with the Tenant Involvement Group, demonstrating the council's commitment to incorporating tenant voices into our decision-making. In the 2024/5 tenant satisfaction survey, 84% of tenants responded that they were 'overall satisfied' with us as a landlord, up 3% from the previous year.

In February a major, and increased, investment total of £22.11m was approved for housing maintenance and improvements to the Council's housing stock. The funding will support several projects to further upgrade properties across the district and continue to provide energy efficient, safe and quality housing for residents. Fire safety improvements have also been budgeted for, whilst £15.2m has been allocated to building and acquiring new council homes. £1.87m has been allocated towards energy efficiency activity to deliver on our Greener Housing Strategy commitments, working towards our long-term goal of bringing all properties to EPC C rating by 2030.

Development of a comprehensive Condensation, Damp and Mould Policy was completed this year, designed to manage tenants reports of these issues and maintain our housing stock and tenant safety. Prioritising health and safety, property maintenance, tenant satisfaction and compliance with regulatory standards, the policy is crucial in meeting housing needs and supporting our tenants.



GIS map of the district

## Place

### **Shaping our place now and for future generations**

Following the February 2024 approval of a full review of our adopted local plan, activity in this area began this year. This has included a call for development sites exercise which generated over 150 submissions over the 3-month consultation period. Several studies were commissioned to look at requirements for housing for different groups in the community, open spaces, play pitches and play facilities and other considerations to be reflected in planning policy. We hosted 7 engagement sessions across the district, giving over 200 people the opportunity to ask questions directly to our planning policy team, raise issues and concerns and contribute to the consultation. A draft local plan will be considered towards the end of 2025.

A referendum in July saw 83.2% of Ringwood residents (58.93% turn out) vote to adopt the Neighbourhood Plan for Ringwood, which will now be part of the development plans for New Forest District Council and New Forest National Park Authority. This brings several benefits to the town including community-led development, sustainability, environmental enhancements and economic growth.

We successfully lobbied HCC to reconsider plans to close two household waste and recycling centres within the district. The decision to not close the sites was welcomed in October, aligning with our goals to improve recycling and reduce waste.

### **Protecting our climate, coast, and natural world**

A Climate Change and Nature Emergency update report was published this year, detailing our progress in tackling climate change and improving nature recovery (latest report covering Jan 1, 2023, to Mar 31, 2024), highlighting a reduction in emissions from both the council and district areas of approximately 2%. The report detailed activities which have been undertaken, working in partnership with residents, businesses, community groups and the third sector. This included the launch of Community Energy New Forest supporting renewable energy generation, launch of Cosy Homes New Forest a retrofit tool to advise private residents on basic energy improvements to their homes, establishing orchard habitats at 2 locations within the district, and attending events to raise awareness of proactive action residents could take.



Refurbished beach shelter, Milford On Sea

In addition, we supported New Forest Transition with funding of £40,000 for the New Forest HEAT (Home Energy Advice Team) project (in partnership with community energy south) to fund a new free energy saving advice and volunteer training programme. Funding of £131,000 was also awarded from the UK Government Public Sector Decarbonisation Fund towards the replacement of end-of-life boilers at Appletree Court with more energy efficient Air Source Heat Pumps.

In partnership we secured £41 million for the region through the Warmer Homes Consortium, allowing New Forest residents to apply for grants of up to £25,000 to improve home energy efficiency. This supports the greener housing strategy 2022-32, aiming to meet energy efficiency targets and ease cost-of-living pressures.

This year, the Christchurch Bay and Harbour Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy was approved, developed with BCP council, the Environment Agency, and private consultants. The strategy outlines the preferred actions to protect the coastline from flooding and erosion, covering the NFDC section of coast from BCP's border to Hurst Spit. Development of a similar strategy for the Hurst Spit to Lymington section of our coast is being developed for completion in 2027, and engagement sessions

were held in Lymington and Milford-on-Sea, along with an event for members, officers, and Town and Parish Councilors at Appletree Court.

Ongoing maintenance at Milford-on-Sea was carried out in the autumn to improve seawall protection, this included the placing of 1,100 tons of rock, timber groyne repairs and importing of 2,500 tons of shingle to add to the beach. Improvement works were completed on 8 beach shelters at Milford-on-Sea, Hordle Cliff and Barton-on-Sea, funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, giving them a much-needed facelift and more pleasant and accessible facilities for visitors to our coast.

Works were completed at Woodside Park in Pennington as part of a £1m Green Way recreational mitigation programme to improve walking routes and green spaces (Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funded). The works include new foot paths and boardwalks to establish a new and accessible walking route, a dog training and activity area, and a community orchard.

The 'Let it Bee' campaign ran during spring/summer with grassy areas being left to grow wild where possible and only where they would not cause any obstruction. This initiative aligned with many other Local Authorities, landowners, residents and the Government in recognition of



Waste fleet - Marsh Lane Depot, Lymington

the importance of leaving areas to grow naturally during this time to help pollinators.

The Keyhaven Natural Capital Scheme, the first biodiversity net gain (BNG) and nitrate mitigation scheme in the district, was announced creating a 1,000-acre nature reserve. Developers are required to ensure a 10% improvement in biodiversity, if this can't be achieved on their building site, they can buy BNG units from schemes like Keyhaven which also provide Nitrate Mitigation credits to protect water quality. Developed in partnership with Kingwell (Aubrey) Limited, the New Forest National Park Authority, and Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust the project demonstrates our commitment to sustainable development and sets a positive example of how stakeholders can work together to ensure long-term protection of our environment.

Work was carried out this year towards developing our air-quality strategy which proactively seeks to improve public health and the environment through reducing emissions, building on ongoing air quality work. Key priorities of the plan include addressing health inequalities, tackling pollution, and raising public awareness. Implementation of the strategy will be carried out in partnership with local stakeholders.



Officers and council members opening the new Hardly depot

### **Caring for our facilities, neighbourhoods and open spaces in a modern and responsive way**

It has been a busy year preparing for the launch of our new waste service, commencing in June 2025. Focus has been on ensuring residents are prepared for changes and ensuring we have adequate skills, knowledge and capacity to respond to customer queries.

The new service will be rolled out in 3 phases. To support residents to understand which phase they live in a postcode look-up tool was launched on our website, the page has been viewed over 14,500 times. All residents in the first phase have been sent a letter and information leaflet on how new collections will work, key dates and where to access support if needed, further information will be shared in the coming months. Staff and Councillor sessions were held to introduce the changes and ensure a consistent approach when speaking with residents.

Since April 2024 we have been running a fortnightly garden waste collection service using wheeled bins, replacing the previous sack collection. Customers have responded well and over 29% of residents are now signed up to this paid service. Up to the end of December 2024, this service saw a 46% increase in garden waste tonnage compare to the previous year when the sack service was in place.

The new Hardley Depot, replacing Claymeadow in Totton, opened in March 2025 and will serve as a base for operational services in the east of the district. The depot features spacious offices, meeting rooms, vehicle maintenance areas, electric vehicle charging points, and ample storage. This significant project - finalised after 10 years of work, aims to provide adequate facilities to allow sustainable service growth, better working conditions for staff, and enhanced service delivery for residents.

Our emergency response team was called into action this year, notably responding to a sewage alert/do not swim warning at Milford-on-Sea and multiple water shortages across the east of the district affecting over 18,000 homes. Response included distribution of water, sharing of key messages/updates and ensuring vulnerable residents could access additional support. The team also worked on upskilling local community stakeholders to proactively support their residents to improve their resilience. This was through the Community Forum, a series of events which invites town and parish councillors, local organisations and responders to network, share advice and guidance, hear presentations from key speakers. We have also lobbied with other councils and MPs to secure a more effective and timely response to water shortages from Southern Water.



Salisbury Road Arcade, Totton

## Prosperity

### **Maximising the benefits of inclusive economic growth and investment**

The Solent Freeport is a unique opportunity, bringing sustainable economic growth to the district. The Leader represented the council on the Solent Freeport Board through the year and the following were agreed by Cabinet in April as the priorities for the New Forest which would be achieved through a successfully delivered Solent Freeport: Transport/wider infrastructure, Employment and Skills, Prosperous Communities and Environmental Sustainability. Work has begun on the development of a Local Delivery Plan.

Over £5m funding was allocated in 2024/5 from the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), towards projects across the district. The projects will help deliver town centre improvements, develop recreation grounds, walking routes, and support flood defense work. In total 79 bids for CIL funding were received in the 2024 bidding window and funding for the successful schemes will be released during the 2025/6 financial year. The increased uptake in the bidding process could be attributed to a review of our community grant scheme resulting in town and parish council's being encouraged to apply for CIL funding to allow community grant funding

to reach smaller community led and multi-year projects. It has been agreed that the funding window for 2026/7 be opened early, allowing more time for applicants to develop proposals and help accelerate the delivery of future infrastructure improvements.

### **Supporting our high-quality business base and economic centres to thrive and grow**

Work has been completed towards the development of the Totton Town Centre Masterplan, working with the Totton Partnership, to regenerate Totton town centre. The plan aims to improve access and connectivity, transform underutilised sites and enhance public space, creating a vibrant, attractive town centre which serves waterside communities, drawing on unique characteristics. Key aspects of the plan include community collaboration, expert support and resident involvement. An update report was endorsed by cabinet in March 2023 which approved further engagement with local partners and residents, further development of the plan and several 'quick wins' to be implemented in the shorter term. Consultants have now been appointed to support the design process.

We continued to sponsor the 'Best Micro-Business' award at the New Forest Business



Partnership, Brilliance in Business awards, spotlighting business with fewer than 5 employees.

We secured £1 million from the government's UK Shared Prosperity Fund and just over £0.5 million through the Rural England Prosperity Fund Funds were directed to projects and interventions including town centre improvements in Totton, Fordingbridge, New Milton, Ringwood, Hythe and Dibden, and Marchwood.

### **Championing skills and access to job opportunities**

We participated in an apprenticeship levy transfer initiative working with Solent Business and Skills partnership, funding apprenticeships for local businesses of up to £50,000, easing costs to SMEs within the district and allowing access to apprenticeship training fees they would not otherwise have had access to. We pledged over £20,000 to BlueBird Care, enabling 3 new level 3 care apprenticeships at locations in Totton, Lymington and Ringwood.

Using UK Share Prosperity funding we partnered with Solent Business & Skills Solutions to launch the New Forest Apprenticeship and Skills Hub early this year. The hub helps local businesses and organisations find suitable training providers, choose relevant apprenticeship or skills programs, and navigate funding options,

including levy transfers. The service aims to enable business to invest in workforce development, enhancing local skills and employment opportunities.

We took part in the annual LGA apprentice of the year competition, which provided an opportunity to learn from, share skills and work and network with other apprentices. The council has 18 people currently on an apprenticeship, working towards nationally recognised qualifications, which exceeds targeted expectation.

A tour of our Moore Close development in New Milton during the construction phase was given to domestic electrical installation students from Brockenhurst College. The tour gave them the opportunity to see how electrical work is carried out on an active site and aimed to enhance their understanding of the trade.

Two colleagues, from our Housing and Environmental Health teams, entered the Young Local Authority of the Year competition in March 2025. The event is designed to provide a supportive atmosphere, offering attendees constructive feedback through a series of formal presentations, discussions and informal challenges. The competition focuses on improving attendees' communication skills and building their confidence and provides a valuable networking opportunity for those in the early stages of their local government careers.



Colleagues at Appletree Court, Lyndhurst

## Future New Forest

### Putting our customers at the heart

Our new Customer Strategy 2024 – 28 sets out our vision and commitment to achieving the best possible customer experience for our residents. The policy outlines how customers will be at the heart of everything we do, utilising technology, a digital design approach and data-led decision making to provide a better and consistent experience for all our customers.

We are committed to providing residents, tenants and customers with quality services, however, sometimes things do go wrong. We encourage our residents to tell us when this happens so we can put things right, learn from our mistakes and improve our services. We have updated our corporate complaints procedure to meet enhanced requirements set out in the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's and the Housing Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Codes. The profile of complaints has been raised both locally and at a national level and we have seen a significant increase in the number of corporate complaints during 2024/25 (a 113% increase from 2023/24).

We recognise the importance of complaints as a key source of insight and are committed to using complaints to drive service improvements. Demonstrating our Learning value we have

implemented processes to address failures arising from complaints, implementing actions to improve services and ensure a better future experience for residents, tenants and customers.

In our housing services, a tenant complaint forum has been established. This small group of tenants will monitor the service received by complainants and make recommendations that aim to increase tenant satisfaction, whilst a tenant representative will sit on the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Panel to provide the tenant viewpoint.

We have seen an increase in residents seeking to exercise information rights over their personal data, including subject access requests and requests to change or delete their data. There has been a 100% increase in the number of requests received in 2024/25 from 2023/24.

Work has continued towards implementing a new digital platform which will manage our customer database (often referred to as a customer relationship management (CRM) system) as well as an online customer portal, telephony and call/email handling, and other applications for managing customer cases to create more flexible and efficient customer engagement.



People strategy staff engagement

## Being an employer of choice

The council has developed a new People Strategy aimed at attracting, retaining, and developing staff, demonstrating significant progress towards becoming an employer of choice. The strategy is shaped by four themes: grow, connect, empower, and strong roots, which align with the council's LEAF values. An action plan has been developed, prioritising staff support and development despite the uncertainties of LGR shortening delivery timescales. The strategy has been approved and formally launched in early 2025/6.

Working for the council offers a unique opportunity to make a real difference, combining meaningful, purposeful work with a strong sense of community. This year's staff survey saw an increased response rate of 16% (from 41% in 2022), with 73.5% of respondents strongly agreeing they understand council priorities and objectives, 88% feeling their work makes a difference to our communities, and 81% enjoying working for the authority. The survey highlighted areas for improvement, including access to line managers, ensuring staff are heard, and providing support for those experiencing inappropriate behavior from colleagues or the public.

Several HR policy amendments were approved, including changes to maternity, paternity, and adoption leave, support leave for carers,

flexible working from day one of employment, and a new buying and selling leave scheme. Additionally, 40 staff members across different grades completed management development training, with new cohorts planned for 2025/6, reflecting the council's commitment to developing management skills. Housing Services Managers have begun work to achieve qualifications via the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) to meet new requirements set out by the Regulator of Social Housing, whilst the Building Control Team undertook competency assessments to register as Registered Building Inspectors (RBI) to meet new standards. There was an increase in corporate training spend in 2024/5 of 8%.

The council strengthened its approach to equality, diversity, and inclusion. This includes forming the first employee-led LGBT+ network to connect colleagues, support peers, share knowledge, and improve services. Efforts to increase the diversity of applicants resulted in a 4% increase this year, with continued focus through the People Strategy.

The away space, a quiet room open to all colleagues at our Appletree Court offices was opened this year, championed by the Chief Executive, this space is designed to be accessible to all colleagues, for the purposes of quiet contemplation, meditation, time out, prayer, breastfeeding or for pregnant mothers, and to observe religious practices.



Appletree Court, Lyndhurst

The council was awarded Employer of the Year at the Brockenhurst College awards ceremony in July, recognising its commitment to strengthening relationships with the college and joint efforts towards improving apprenticeships and work experience.

### **Being financially responsible**

Brought about by the announcement of LGR the decision was taken to pause a pre-approved accommodation project at Appletree Court, and to pause further work on feasibility options around the Lymington Town Hall Site. Work on the Council's Strategic Asset Management plan commenced, to ensure future opportunities aligned to our broader estate are mindful of impacts that could arise from LGR proposals.

A new LGR reserve was established with an initial £150,000 to ensure the Council is well placed to access resources required to support LGR preparations. A review of the approved transformation strategy and business case was also undertaken to ensure activity is aligned and reasonable given potential impacts of LGR.

To ensure readiness for the reform to the public procurement regime and ensure we meet the requirements of the Procurement Act 2023, preparatory activity took place, including a review of all contract standing orders and benchmarking exercise against some comparator authorities with similar expenditure and population.

### **Designing modern and innovative services**

Work was completed to develop a new Digital Strategy, aligning with other key corporate documents, including The Corporate Plan. The Strategy enables delivery of 6 digital principles, customer first, digital by design, data driven, digital transformation, secure by design, robust and resilient infrastructure and digital skills for all. It was acknowledged by elected members that digital services underpin everything we do in supporting services operate. The strategy has been considered through the lens of potential LGR impacts but recognises the importance of remaining agile moving forwards. It remains important that all services are accessible to all residents, and additional support is available to those who are less digitally confident.

The ongoing commitment to modernise our digital service delivery to support our residents and our staff has seen projects commence to replace our housing maintenance software, alongside our customer facing digital platforms which will position the organisation well for future opportunities.