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PARISH COUNCIL

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Cllr Jeremy Heron
Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate
New Forest District Council
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Sent by email: jeremy.heron@nfdc.gov.uk

Dear Cllr Heron,

NFDC Budget Consultation - Beaulieu Parish Council Response

Executive Summary

Beaulieu Parish Council recognises the considerable financial challenges facing NFDC following the withdrawal of Local Government Reorganisation in Hampshire. With a forecast budget shortfall of £1.25 million in 2027/28, potentially rising to about £3.5 million by 2030/31, we recognise that difficult decisions lie ahead.

However, we are concerned that the current consultation does not provide residents with sufficient information to make informed choices or allow NFDC to rely confidently on the results when determining future service reductions.

- **Existing savings**: NFDC previously identified £1.626 million in potential savings and efficiencies, but it is unclear how much has been achieved and how much will favourably affect 2027/28.
- **Incomplete information**: Three of the six proposals under consultation provide no quantified savings, yet respondents are asked to comment on and rank them.
- **Impact on communities**: Some proposals could adversely affect local businesses and community facilities, while others may simply shift costs to parish councils rather than save taxpayers' money.

We believe NFDC should provide more comprehensive financial information and demonstrate that it has considered reasonable alternatives before making decisions that could have lasting consequences for local communities.

1. The wider financial challenge

The withdrawal of LGR has fundamentally altered NFDC's financial planning assumptions. Rather than preparing to transfer responsibilities to a successor authority, NFDC must now

address its longer-term financial sustainability. The six proposals under consultation may mark only the beginning of a prolonged programme of expenditure reductions.

The delay to LGR may also offer opportunities to explore greater collaboration and shared services with neighbouring authorities. We encourage NFDC to investigate these alongside its existing efficiency programme, with the aim of protecting essential services wherever possible.

2. Adequacy of the consultation

NFDC's previous budget process identified £1.626 million in potential savings and efficiencies, including reductions in internal expenditure. We do not know how much has been delivered, what remains outstanding, or how these savings relate to the current financial forecast.

Furthermore, three of the six proposals—grounds maintenance, information offices and the transfer of responsibility for public toilets—have no quantified savings. Nevertheless, respondents are asked to express preferences and rank all six proposals.

The established Gunning principles require sufficient information to enable intelligent consideration and response. We are not suggesting that the consultation is necessarily unlawful, but its current structure raises legitimate questions about whether respondents can express informed preferences and, consequently, whether NFDC can reliably use the results to inform its budget decisions.

3. Specific concerns about the proposals

A. Commercial waste collections

We are particularly concerned about the proposed withdrawal of NFDC's commercial waste collection service, which runs at an annual deficit of approximately £75,000. Beaulieu's businesses rely heavily on this service. Its withdrawal could substantially increase costs for small businesses and lead to multiple private contractors, additional collection vehicles and more bins, including on our historic High Street. Local traders have already expressed their concerns.

The New Forest is a nationally important visitor destination, and its economic success depends on its attractive environment, thriving villages and local businesses. NFDC plays an important role in supporting this economy and in protecting the area's character. Not every service should be expected to recover its full costs where wider economic, environmental and community benefits justify the expenditure.

We therefore encourage NFDC to explore alternatives, including reopening subscriptions, improving collection efficiency and reviewing pricing where appropriate.

B. Community grants

We are concerned about withdrawing the £100,000 capital grants programme. Relatively modest grants can unlock substantial matched funding for community facilities. We suggest retaining a smaller, more targeted fund, perhaps £25,000–£50,000 per year.

C. Grounds maintenance and Information Offices

Neither proposal provides sufficient detail on the expected savings or the consequences for service users. We need more information before making meaningful judgements.

D. Public toilets

We understand the financial rationale for exploring transfers to town and parish councils. However, transferring responsibility does not necessarily save local taxpayers' money. It simply shifts costs to parish council precepts, potentially imposing a disproportionate burden on communities that attract substantial numbers of visitors. Presenting such transfers as savings, without distinguishing reductions in NFDC's expenditure from genuine savings to taxpayers, risks misleading consultees. In some cases, the overall cost to taxpayers could increase.

There is also a significant practical obstacle to implementation in 2027/28. Parish councils must submit their precept requirements to NFDC in early January. Even if NFDC decides to proceed with transfers, there is now insufficient time for parish councils to assess the full financial and operational implications, obtain independent quotations and make appropriate provision in their 2027/28 precepts. We therefore do not consider implementation in 2027/28 to be realistically achievable

E. Climate and sustainability

We would welcome clarification on which activities the proposed £100,000 reduction would affect, and whether it could compromise future energy savings or access to external funding.

4. Our request

Given the scale of NFDC's longer-term financial challenge, we believe this first stage must command public confidence. We therefore ask NFDC to:

a) Explain progress against the £1.626 million savings programme identified in its previous budget process and how this relates to the current financial forecast;
b) Quantify the three outstanding proposals, including their service implications, and distinguish genuine savings for taxpayers from costs transferred to parish councils;
c) Demonstrate that reasonable alternatives have been explored, including internal efficiencies, shared services and other opportunities to reduce expenditure; and
d) Consider providing supplementary information and, if necessary, extending or undertaking a further stage of consultation to enable properly informed responses.

We appreciate the difficult decisions facing NFDC and wish to approach them constructively. With financial pressures likely to intensify, it is essential that the Council demonstrate from the outset that its approach is transparent, proportionate and fair.

We would welcome your response and would be pleased to invite you to our next Parish Council meeting, on **Thursday 19 November at 6.30pm**, to discuss these matters further, including how essential services can best be maintained in the face of these challenges.

Yours sincerely,

Nick Hubbard *Nicky Deering*

Nick Hubbard
Chairman

Nicky Deering
Clerk

Cc: Sir Julian Lewis MP
Cllr Geoffrey Blunden, Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability
Cllr Dan Poole