



Visit Looe Review Supplementary Report

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Agenda Item: 9a
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1. Purpose

- 1.1 To provide a supplementary report for the Extra-ordinary Full Council meeting outlining the role of the Council in future digital marketing and short-medium-term options.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 Councillors are asked to consider the recommendations at 9.

3. Background/Information

- 3.1 For the December meeting of the Full Council the Clerk provided a report on behalf of the Visit Looe working group. The majority of the Working Group recommended that the Council should continue to run a Council funded website using the Simpleview platform. This recommendation was based upon 'business as usual' with the Council continuing to provide a full range of visitor information including where to stay, eat and visit.
- 3.2 The Council has also received a proposal from Welcome to Looe and Polperro which runs a successful commercial website offering similar information to the Council's Visit Looe website. This proposal is provided with the reports for this meeting but in summary the proposal is for the Welcome to Looe and Polperro website to become the official website and social media feed for Looe and the current Visit Looe website to be taken offline. The proposal, written in May 2023 was intended to open the debate. Subsequent discussions and email exchanges have focused on opportunities for partnership working.
- 3.3 As part of the Visit Looe Review the Local Government Resource Centre were commissioned to conduct an independent review of Visit Looe. This report has also been provided for the meeting. The report outlined four options for future delivery: discontinue Visit Looe, maintain Visit Looe, accept the Welcome to Looe and Polperro proposal, remodel the Council's Looe Town Council website to provide tourism, local and council information in a similar way to Liskeard Town Council.
- 3.4 It is important to note that the Visit Looe website represents a small element of the Council's commitment to tourism. The tourist information centre, trailer, street marshal and support for the Looe Tourism Ambassadors Scheme (LATAS) are all important aspects of the Council's investment in tourism.

4 Future Direction of Tourism

- 4.1 Tourism is a fast-paced evolving economy which has experienced significant changes post Covid. Since the Council launched Visit Looe the tourism landscape has shifted rapidly with booking websites such as booking.com and trivago taking an ever-increasing market share. There are also issues of oversupply of accommodation, the rising cost of living impacting on the profitability of businesses and the increasing the cost of a UK holiday.
- 4.2 At a local, regional and national level there is a growing demand to find a balance between the positive economic outputs of tourism and the pressures it brings to bear on a range of issues including housing and the environment. The Council has an important role in ensuring that this careful balance is maintained through its policies and the way in which the town is promoted as a tourist destination.
- 4.3 The Visit Looe Working Group identified that there was no overarching strategy for marketing Looe as a destination. With no strategy in place, it is difficult to make informed long-term decisions.

5 Council's Commitment to Tourism and its Role

- 5.1 Over the years the way in which the Council has provided support to tourism has changed but it has remained committed to assisting this key aspect of the local economy.
- 5.2 A Marketing strategy will enable the Council and partners to agree future roles and activity. Discussions might lead to a new operational model such as a Community Investment Company who might take the lead for coordinating tourism marketing for the town. However, the lack of a strategy must not prevent the Council from making short to medium term decisions.
- 5.3 Digital marketing is an essential component of tourism promotion, and the Council should continue to provide an independent, reputable digital presence which seeks to balance supporting tourism while also seeking to mitigate the negative impacts of tourism. Equally the Council has invested in developing a strong, recognisable brand for Looe and this should be retained and used as a quality kite mark for tourism in the town.
- 5.4 The Council must also acknowledge that there are a range of commercial and public sector bodies who are part of the digital marketing landscape of Looe. Working collaboratively will bring benefits to the town but will require the Council to redefine its digital marketing role. By focusing on promoting Looe as a great place to visit the Council's Visit Looe website would have a clearly defined role. Information about accommodation, shops and food are successfully provided by commercial operators.

6. The Next 12 Months

- 6.1 Visit Looe currently operates on the Simpleview platform. This platform is not ideally suited to pure destination marketing but can be repurposed in the short term. The focus would be Visit, Things to Do, What's On.
- 6.2 The stay, eat and shopping functions on the website are the most challenging to manage. Maintaining relationships with businesses, updating photographs, refreshing content requires considerable staff time. The Visit Looe Review working group identified that many other Councils were putting significantly more staff time into their websites in order to keep these aspects of the website fresh and current. We know that Welcome to Looe and Polperro already provide this information to a high standard. Therefore, Council should consider a 12-month trial during which the Visit Looe website would link to Welcome to Looe and Polperro for stay, eat and shopping information.
- 6.3 The stay, eat and shopping functions on Visit Looe would be mothballed for the next 12 months but could be reactivated at no additional cost. The impact of not using these functions should be evaluated. It should be noted that by not using these functions the Visit Looe website may no longer appear at the top of a search engine return as it is this type of information that pushes a website to the top of the list.
- 6.4 The removal of the stay function has implications for our advertising members. These members rely on us, have been loyal to Visit Looe, value the Council's management of the site and have made a financial commitment. We will need to discuss with our members how they would like to be represented on our

site over the next 12 months. This may include using the ‘stay’ function just for our members.

- 6.5 Payment for the on-line booking facility on the Simpleview platform would be suspended. The full capability of this function has never been properly exploited and as identified visitors are increasingly booking direct through companies like booking.com.
- 6.6 The difficulties that the Council has experienced with the Visit Looe website and linked social media have been primarily caused by not investing in appropriate levels of staffing with clearly defined objectives. Working in partnership with Welcome to Looe and Polperro and clarity around the role of the Visit Looe website will mean that the Council can employ a member of staff whose focus will be on content creation and associated social media. A full-time role of Content and Communications Manager would mean that the Council could have one person managing both the Visit Looe and council websites, all social media and PR. This role would also provide administrative support for the Looe Tourism Ambassadors Scheme (LATAS).
- 6.7 The Visit Looe Review clearly identified that if the Council wished to provide a tourism website there should be an acknowledgement that this was a service to the community. There should be no expectation of income. The Visit Looe website currently has 10 number of paid members. As a goodwill gesture and in recognition of the changing nature of the site it is proposed that these members will not be charged a fee in 2024.

7. Year 2

- 7.1 2024 should be used as a year to trial new partnership arrangements, experiment with using Visit Looe as a destination marketing tool and bring stakeholders together to deliver a marketing strategy for the town.
- 7.2 It should be acknowledged that the Simpleview platform, particularly if the Council continues to focus on destination marketing is not a long-term solution. Extending the contract with Simpleview for 12 months allows the options highlighted in this report to be tested but it is important to note that the Visit Looe Review working group identified several alternative web providers and the Local Government Resource Centre option 4 was for a ‘Liskeard model’. Other partnership arrangements may emerge, and the marketing strategy may lead to other operational models.
- 7.3 In order to enter year 2 with a long-term solution work to identify the best platform for Visit Looe must begin in March. The work will need to run concurrently with managing the current Visit Looe site and creating a marketing strategy for the town. Energy and focus must not be lost.

8. Costs

Simpleview 12-month contract	£6,065 (reduction of £1,730)
Simpleview video page feature module (optional) It is already possible to embed videos into the body of the webpages this module allows for video to be used as the main image on each page see Visit Maldon District - Visit Maldon District	£1,240 one off charge
Content and Communications Manger (Full time, Scale 16 subject to job evaluation) Please note that this role will cover both Visit Looe and Town Council requirements	£28,282

9. Recommendations

- 9.1 That for the next 12 months the Council uses the Visit Looe and Social media platforms to promote Looe as a great place to visit.

- 9.2 That the Council renew its contract with Simpleview for 12 months. That the council exclude from this contract the on-line booking facility. The option to include a video page feature at an additional cost of £1,240 be considered by the Content and Communications Manager when in post and a recommendation made to the Services, Assets and Community Committee.
- 9.3 That the Council employ a Content and Communications Manager on a full-time basis for an initial 12-month period. The salary for this post will be determined by the Job evaluation process but will be circa £28,282.
- 9.4 That the Council invite Welcome to Looe and Polperro to work in partnership. That a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is agreed for an initial 12 months. The MoU would need to contain explicit agreements around respective roles, liaison and communications, a pledge to resolve issues privately and respectfully and contingency arrangements were either website to cease operations
- 9.5 That the Council commit to working with partners to develop a destination marketing strategy for the town.
- 9.6 That the Services, Assets and Community Committee have oversight of the website and partnership working over the trial 12-month period. That work to identify the best platform for Visit Looe continues at pace and if the recommendation is to use an alternative platform this work is completed in time to allow for a smooth transition well ahead of the Simpleview 90-day notice period.