

Visit Looe

Consultancy and Research Report for Looe Town Council from the Local Government Resource Centre

December 2023

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Introduction

In June 2020, Looe Town Council signed a contract with Simpleview Ltd to deliver a destination website for the town and its immediate catchment area (www.visitlooe.co.uk). The site was launched in April 2021. The contract with Simpleview expired in 2023 and was extended for a period of 90 days to allow the present review to conclude. Under the terms of the agreement, the Council is required to serve 6 months' notice of its intention to end the relationship. In September 2023, Looe Town Council embarked on the review of the Visit Looe website. The review has been undertaken by a working group established by the Council to examine all aspects of the current service. In October, the Council commissioned the Local Government Resource Centre CIC (LGRC) to assist with the review and provide independent analysis of the options available.

This report presents the findings of the review and options for consideration by the Council.

Background: The review

Looe Town Council now wishes to consider its options as it approaches the end of the Simpleview contract. In Autumn 2023, the Council commissioned a review to establish whether it should continue with the service or consider alternative courses of action. A working group was set up and tasked to carry out the review and submit its findings to the Council meeting on 12th December. The working group comprises:

- Councillor Stephen Remington
- Councillor Jon Holmes
- Councillor Chris Harwood
- Lynda Powell (Town Clerk)
- Fiona Wilkes-Jones (Looe Town Council - Responsible Financial Officer)

From October, the working group has had the support of the Local Government Resource Centre – Vice-Chair, Director and Trustee, Steve Milton and Chief Executive, David McKnight.

With the support of LGRC, the working group has:

- Held a workshop for Visit Looe advertising members on 28th September.
- Analysed costs associated with Visit Looe.
- Revisited previous reports and studies (desktop research).
- Analysed Visit Looe and other relevant data.
- Met with Looe Town Council's Business Development Manager
- Reviewed 18 destination sites in comparable towns.
- Commissioned a survey of businesses, visitors, and residents from 6th - 24th November.
- Met with the owner of Welcome to Looe and Polperro on 18th November.
- Held a workshop with councillors at Looe library and Community Hub on 22nd November.
- Held a workshop with local businesses at Tregoad on 27th November.
- Reviewed the outcome of the research, evaluated the results and presented options.

The working group has spent time looking at websites that use different software as well as sites that use Simpleview. This work enabled councillors to look at alternative providers, different approaches to content, costs, and resourcing. The members carried out an assessment of alternative platforms in terms of cost and benefit. Additionally, the group considered the barriers that are holding back the current website in order to form a judgement on whether Looe Town Council has the capability and capacity to address identified issues. The review and its conclusions have been shaped by the views expressed by users of the system and other local stakeholders. This report returns to the conclusions of the Working Group later.

Visit Looe

In 2020, the Council decided to invest in a website to support tourism in Looe which is the primary driver of the local economy and jobs. At the outset, the Council was very clear about its aims for this new service.

Visit Looe would:

- Develop a positive marketing brand for the benefit of Looe and surrounding area.
- Promote Looe as a year-round destination for visitors.
- Grow organically over time and cement its position as a valued service.
- Be shaped around the needs of visitors and businesses.
- Operate as a not-for-profit service, investing income back into the site.
- Form the basis of closer partnership working with businesses of all sizes.
- Support local businesses and boost the local economy

The Visit Looe website was launched in April 2021. The site is developed and maintained by Simpleview Ltd, the UK subsidiary of the US company Simpleview LLP – founded in 2007 and based in Tuscon, Arizona. Simpleview Ltd is incorporated in the UK (Company Number 13829122). The company's UK office is based in Liverpool. The company employs over 350 members of staff across the globe and provides visitor solutions to over 1,000 worldwide destinations. Simpleview is a global leader in the provision of destination management websites.

The decision to enter a contract to provide the Visit Looe service was also part of a wider review of the Council's role in supporting the town's tourism industry and the wider economy. It coincided with a rationalisation of Council services and the relocation of the tourist information centre to the Council's HQ at Millpool, where it was integrated into the library service.

Over the last eighteen months the Council has made efforts to improve the Visit Looe website. Content has been updated (including licensed Beyond Paradise images), social media marketing has improved and increased efforts have been made to sell the service to potential subscribers. While this has had some impact with increased income and visits to the site, it has become clear to the Council that the undoubted potential of the website and social media has yet to be fully realised. The site has made slow progress gaining traction and there are simply too few listings on the site. The preformatted content looks slick and professional, but the information pages and Council curated content is uninspiring and lacks impact. This is disappointing given the level of the Town Council's investment and reflects poorly on the Council rather than the platform. The reasons why Visit Looe has failed to make a more impressive impact is examined later in this report.

The working party undertaking this review was tasked to advise on whether continuing with Simpleview remains the right option.

Visit Looe: under the bonnet

At its core, the Council's Visit Looe system is a public facing website that works seamlessly with a back-office content management system (CMS) linked to a data management system (DMS). The DMS is a digital store of information that is pulled through and displayed on the site using preformatted style sheets and templates. The content in the DMS is dynamic, meaning that as soon as it is edited, the Visit Looe site is updated with the latest content. This gives users the opportunity to manage their data in real time. The CMS will display different categories of information in specific ways – from listings, images, events, through to calendars. It also gives subscribers full control over their listing but at the same time ensuring that content is always displayed in the consistent Visit Looe style.

The system can also work as a post board by using static content templates to provide public information and news pages.

The site has a tiered level of secure access, with full control retained by the Council's site administrators. Administrators have access to all content as well as a suite of reports, and analytics providing metrics relating to visitors, onward referrals, specific page hits and individual user activity.

The site has been designed specifically for destination management organisations, with functionality tailored to the needs of the tourism industry. Within the contract, Simpleview provides a managed service with ongoing system upgrades to improve the service and adapt to technological or regulatory changes. This means that it is responsive to the latest internet standards and protocols, building in resilience and future-proofing the site against potential threats. The site also benefits from advanced search engine optimisation (SEO), this means that content on the site is listed higher in search engine results. Testing carried out during this review has shown that in many cases, only the global brands such as Booking.com and TripAdvisor feature higher in common searches (accommodation in Looe, where to stay in Looe, events in Looe, etc). The value of SEO cannot be underestimated and is a challenge for smaller sites. This is a significant benefit of the Simpleview contract.

The site structure is designed to provide a range of information aimed at visitors, but also has content of value to residents, such as the 'what's on' guide. The site uses broad categories to organise content: food and drink, accommodation, shopping, explore the area, things to do, local information, etc. Site navigation is simple and intuitive.

The site offers direct booking functionality for accommodation and attractions. This allows visitors to use a search for accommodation based on their specific requirements and then to make a direct booking. The 'quick booking' facility on the site provides links direct to the business's own booking system, or much more commonly, the main commercial booking services used by the business – Booking.com, Hotels.com, Book Direct, etc. Visit Looe integrates with these external platforms to present options on the site before users access the external booking facility – for example, it pulls up room options and availability. The CMS then transfers user data to those external platforms based on search terms entered in the Visit Looe search engine – dates, number of guests, room options, board, etc. This means almost all bookings are referred through third parties that charge commission to providers. While direct bookings might seem to be a potentially lucrative area; in reality, most smaller accommodation providers will not have the resources to develop sophisticated (and compatible) booking systems and will opt to take direct bookings by phone or emails. This may change in the future as more low-cost booking apps come onto the market and as Simpleview adapts its system further.

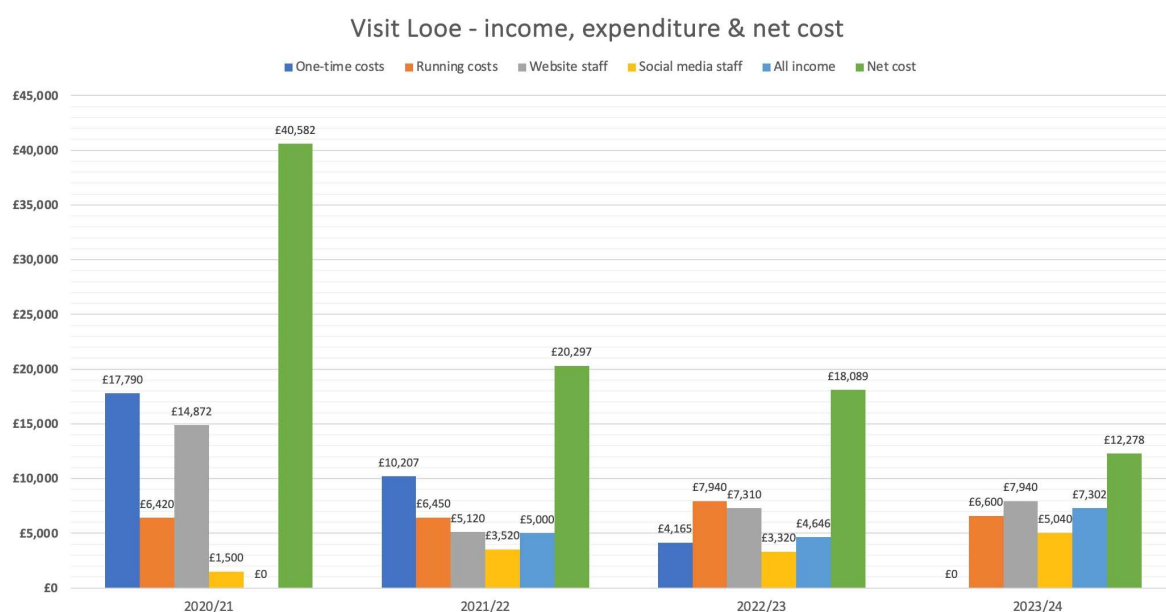
The value of the direct booking module has been questioned during the review. The prominence of the direct booking search engine on the site, means that only a small number of bookable accommodation providers are listed when an accommodation search is performed. General listings are available through the various category search options, but this is not as obvious to users. While the direct bookings module adds value to businesses with direct booking facilities, for the majority it does not. This may need to be addressed in the future, if smaller businesses are to gain more value from the site. The option to search all accommodation providers, and then to link direct to the provider from the listing may offer greater benefit and avoid third party booking fees for customers. Alternatively, the direct booking option may be listed for those compatible accommodation providers only, with the search facility removed or reduced in prominence – for example moved to a direct bookings page.

There is little doubt that the Council has invested wisely in a platform more than capable of delivering the service intended when launched. It is very widely adopted in the industry and has grown to become a well-resourced and reliable market leader. Simpleview is market tested and provides the full functionality and capability required. This leads us to conclude that it is not the platform that is hindering growth and that other factors must be hampering the delivery of the benefits intended.

Visit Looe: resourcing

As mentioned above, the Council has invested £91,246 into Visit Looe since 2020. This money was invested in good faith to support the local tourism industry and the economy of Looe. At the outset, there was a clear expectation that the system would generate significant income over time, at least to the point where there was a net-zero cost to the Council.

The following graph (Fig. 1) presents a breakdown of the Council’s investment in the Visit Looe platform since its launch in 2021.



Looe TC Working Party 2023 **Fig 1.**

The initial set up costs associated with the Visit Looe site and brand in its first year was £40,582. This included a ‘one off’ set up fee of £15,740 to Simpleview, together with branding and video costs of £2,050; an annual licence fee of £6,420, and staff time allocated at £40,582, plus £1,500 for social media. This represents a significant investment by the Council.

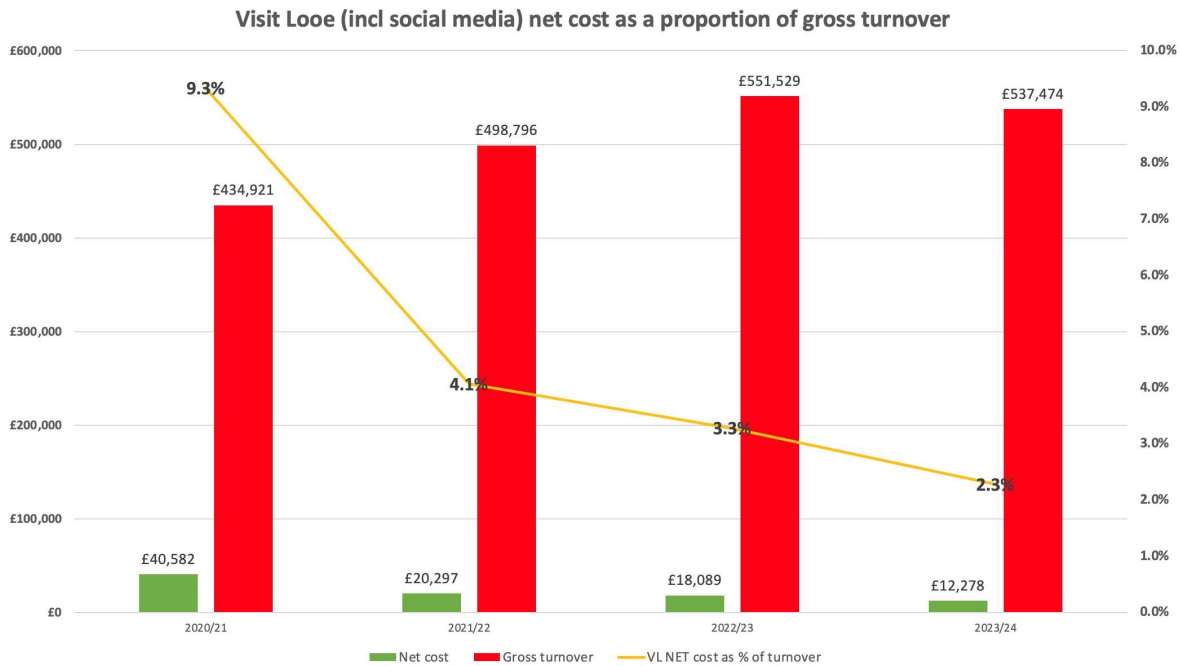
At the outset, the aim of the site was to develop a positive brand for Looe and to promote the town as a year-round destination for visitors. The ambition at launch, was to monetise the site to ensure running costs were met by membership fees. In 2023/24, advertising income from the site is estimated at £7,940 which has grown from £5,100 in the first full operational year. In the current year, the annual running costs associated with the Simpleview contract is £6,600. The Council also allocates staffing resources to support the service. In 2023/24 these costs are estimated at £7,302. In addition, the Council has a contract with a social media company, Astrality, to manage the Council’s social media communications. The annual cost of the Council’s contract with Astrality is around £5,040. Annual website domain registration costs associated with the site are £30.

It should be noted that the original contract cost agreed with Simpleview was £6,420. In 2022, the Council decided to increase this by £630 per year to include a new accommodation bookings module. This decision was based, in part, on the findings of the 2020 PFA Research Ltd (PFAR) report *Market Analysis of Tourist Accommodation to Inform the Looe Neighbourhood Development Plan*. One of the key findings in the PFAR report (pp 18) was the need to ‘Introduce a booking system on the Town Council’s website.’

The principal source of income from the Visit Looe website is derived from its three main sponsors - Tregoad Park-Waterside Holidays, Cornish Collection and Portbyhan Hotel. Essentially, this income subsidises the site, with few businesses taking up the other sponsorship packages (Bronze, Silver, Gold, and Platinum) available.

With this in mind, there is clearly scope to revisit and significantly reduce the cost of subscription for smaller businesses without affecting overall income. The results of the stakeholder workshops, show that the dominance of the principal site sponsors is problematic, with smaller businesses questioning the prominence of rival business advertisements.

It is clear from the graph at Fig 1, that the net annual costs associated with running the service is reducing, and in the current year it is predicted to be around £12,278. While this is encouraging, it must be remembered that there are significant improvements required and these may add further costs if pursued. The following graph (Fig. 2) shows the reducing impact of the Visit Looe costs on the Council’s finances.



Looe TC Working Party 2023

Fig 2.

The overall impact of the costs associated with the Visit Looe service on the Council’s finances is reducing. Discounting the first year where the initial start-up costs skewed the true picture, the net costs have reduced from 4.2% to 2.3% (and the latest projections show this downward trend continuing) of the Council’s annual budget over the last three years. It must also be remembered that the Council’s social media costs are bundled in with the Visit Looe numbers. In the context of these figures, the cost of running Visit Looe is comparatively modest.

Based on the financial analysis alone, there would be no pressing need to make changes based on cost. But, as mentioned earlier, significant improvements are required if Visit Looe is to meet its original brief, and this may well require additional investment. Given the comments about pricing examined later, it may be possible to increase income by reducing costs for smaller businesses, but this would be dependent on maintaining the principal partnerships.

Since the site was launched, there have been significant staffing changes with the Town Clerk and the Communications and Events Officer both leaving their posts shortly after the site was launched. There has also been a nine-month period of transition, with the council’s staff lacking the strong leadership of a Town Clerk. There is no question that this has had a detrimental impact on the Council’s strategic focus, including the development of the Visit Looe brand.

From January 2022, a new post of Business Development Manager was created (30 hours per week). 60% of this post is dedicated to the management of the website and liaising with new and existing members. From

September 2022 social media has been delivered under contract by Astrality (14 hours a month). From September 2022 the What's On section of the website has been updated by a member of the Library/Tourist Information team (2 hours per week). Discontinuing Visit Looe would not only save on the Simpleview contract costs but also reduce staffing costs, or allow for that resource to be deployed differently – around £10k pa.

Visit Looe: performance

Figures analysed by the Looe Town Council Working Group, show that, overall, traffic on the Visit Looe site reached its highest level in the period between January and September 2023 - 993,952 events recorded in the Google analytics report. This is up by around 40% on the same period in 2022 (700,321).

Statistics provided by the Simpleview reporting system, show that, since launch, the number of users of the site has increased from 48,583 in 2021 to 91,576 in 2022 and 106,940 in the current year to date. The number of new users of the site is also growing. In 2022, the site attracted around 36k new users and up until September 2023, that had increased to around 46k. In 2022, the site received 231,815 unique page views and in the current year to date that has risen to 295,482. In total, since launch the site has achieved 667,710 unique page views in total. As you would expect, use is seasonal with far more site activity in the main holiday season. Use peaks at around 17k unique page visits per month in the summer, and drops to around 5k visits per month in the winter season.

Accommodation forms the majority of site content. Of 1,004 site entries, over a third are accommodation listings.

Accommodation Type & Number	2023
Bed and Breakfast	35
Guest House	54
Hotel	48
Self-Catering Accommodation	85
Holiday Parks	116
Camping (2023 - 17) Glamping (2023 - 4) Caravan Sites (2023 - 9)	30
Total	368

Looe TC Working Party 2023 **Fig 3.**

The introduction of the direct booking module has coincided with an increase in page referrals – visitors leaving the Visit Looe site and following listing links to the product.

Site listing and products

	Total products	Average product impressions	Average product referral
Jan - Sept 2023	1004	68	31
Jan – Sept 2022	583	21	12

Looe TC Working Party 2023 **Fig 4.**

The bookings module is new to the site, the following table shows its operation up until the end of September 2023.

Bookings and referrals

	Product Page Impressions	Price and availability accessed	Booking Website Referral	3rd Party booking referrals
Jan - Sept 2023	68,638	791	124	113
Jan – Sept 2022	67,167	43	0	5

Looe TC Working Party 2023 **Fig 5.**

It is difficult to assert that Visit Looe is performing well without comparison data from other similar platforms. The Fowey Simpleview site received 370,000 page views in 2022, showing that Visit Looe with 295,482 is not far behind the most directly comparable site in Cornwall.

Visit Looe: the views of users

As part of its review, the Council's Working Party arranged a meeting with users of the Visit Looe service. The meeting was held on 28th September. The views of the users are illuminating. In the first part of the meeting, users were asked why Visit Looe is important to their business. The views expressed are set out below:

Visit Looe:

- Supports our brand recognition.
- Associates our brand with a reputable body (LTC).
- Has potential for growth.
- Works well to compliment other sites.
- Associates our brand with high profile events.
- Promotes successful businesses in Looe.
- Brings together businesses, encouraging them to work collaboratively.
- Provides up to date current information which is important to our visitors.

Users were then asked what they valued most about Visit Looe.

- Social media content – hits key topics.
- Site looks good.
- Beyond Paradise links.
- User friendly.
- Town events well promoted.
- Impressed with progress made over such a short period of time.
- Personal contact available with the site administrators.

Finally, users were asked what most needs improving.

- Information needs to be kept current and in the correct areas.
- Pop-up adverts are annoying but accepted as part of current practice.
- Requires more support team hours to grow and be more effective.
- Pictures could improve.
- Engage with clients to better understand different needs.
- Information is not always linked to correct areas.
- Try to make offers time restricted and put them on a dedicated page.
- Set up site administration reminders in MS Outlook to chase/update/change info.
- Site includes areas not in Looe should just be listed as Looe (keep it simple).
- Opening times not fully understood - remove if not applicable.
- All requests for updates to be sent at regular dates in a month (e.g. second week).
- Promoting of seasonal events (Christmas) to be refined.
- Keep it as it is regarding 2 sites (Visit/Welcome) work together to improve both.
- Don't throw away the time and investment already made to date - build on it.
- Promote the direct booking function.

It is clear from the workshop, that Visit Looe is valued by its users and provides a useful service to their business. However, there are many areas where improvements are needed. To achieve these improvements Looe Town Council would need to allocate additional resources, change the allocation of existing resources or access new resources from elsewhere.

It is important to bear in mind that the existing users have also invested time and money in the Visit Looe system and have come to rely on it to promote their businesses. The Council will have to consider carefully how it would manage existing users, should it conclude that further investment is not worthwhile.

The Looe Tourism Survey conducted to support the review also contained specific questions about the Visit Looe service. The survey elicited the views of 20 users of the service, which is a low number given the number of businesses in the Town. Overall, the users rated the service at 3.7 stars out of 5, which is an approval rating of 74%. The following charts, give further details of the views expressed.

What do you most value about the Visit Looe site?

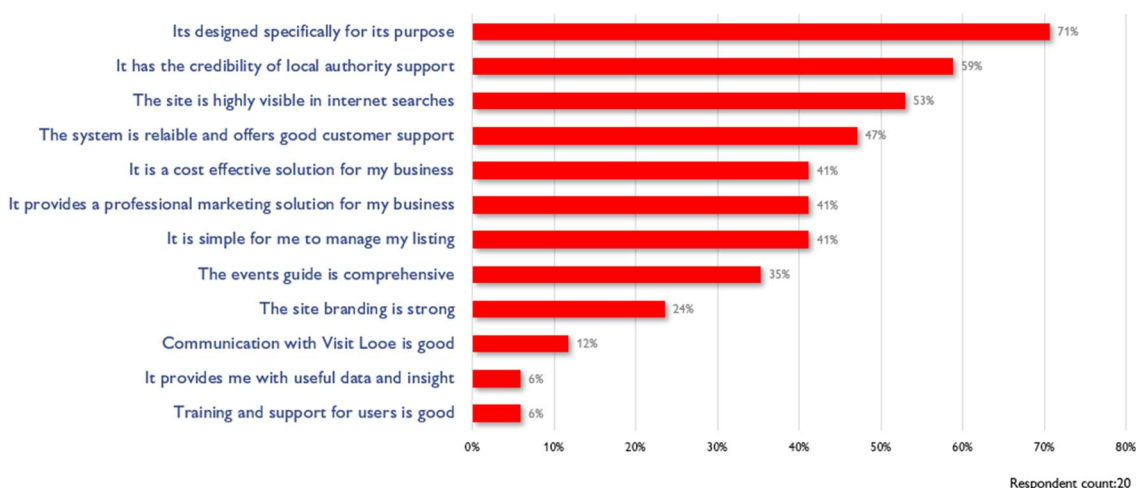


Fig.6

What features of Visit Looe most need improving?

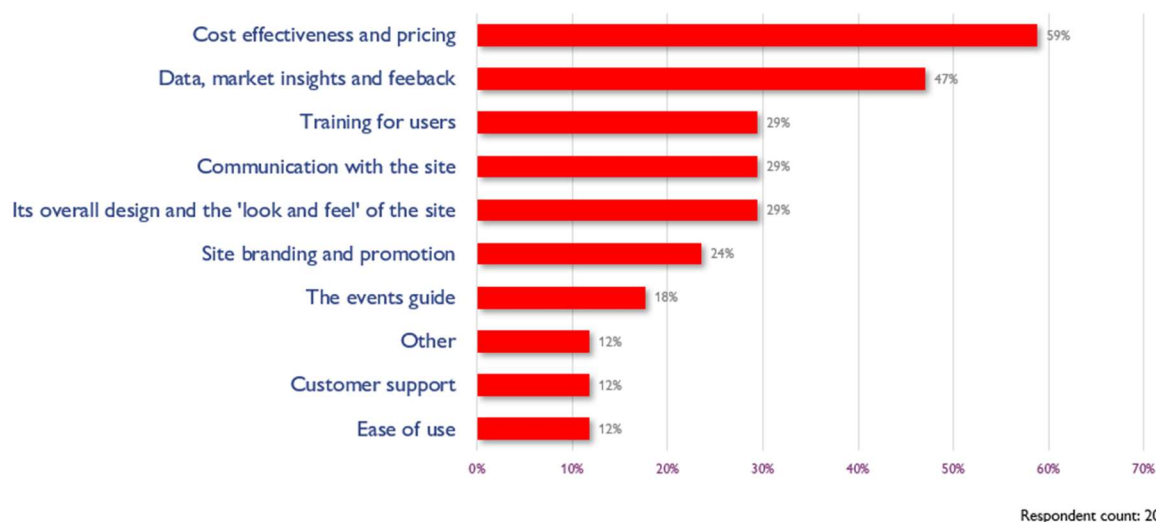


Fig.7

The results in Fig. 6 and Fig. 7 include the views of users only. The most valued features of the service are the specific design of the Simpleview platform, the credibility of association with a public body and the benefits of search engine optimisation. On the flip side, cost effectiveness and the provision of feedback are perceived most negatively. In the following charts (Fig. 8 and Fig. 9), we can see the views of businesses that do not use the service.

Please tell us what you think of the Visit Looe membership rates

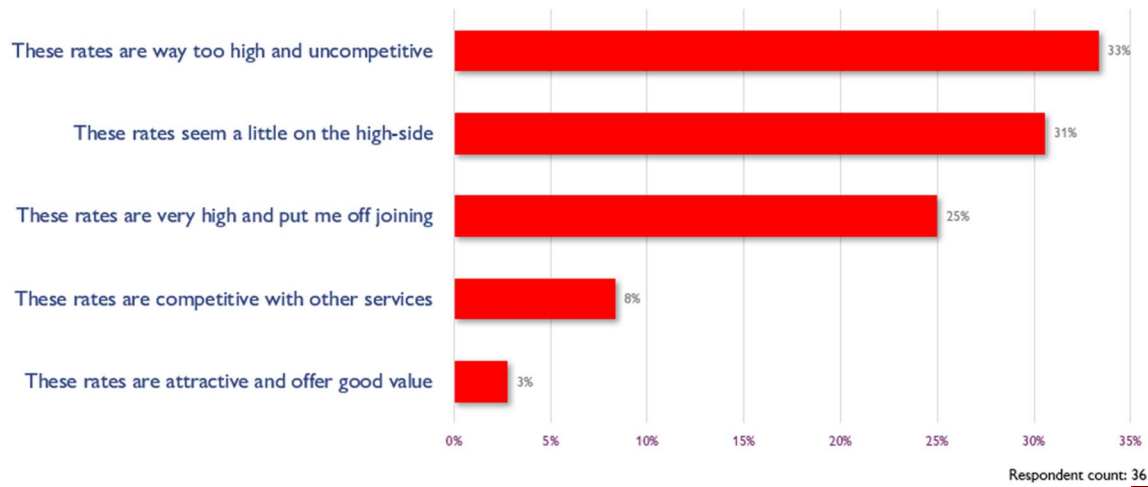


Fig.8

What would encourage you to use the Visit Looe service?

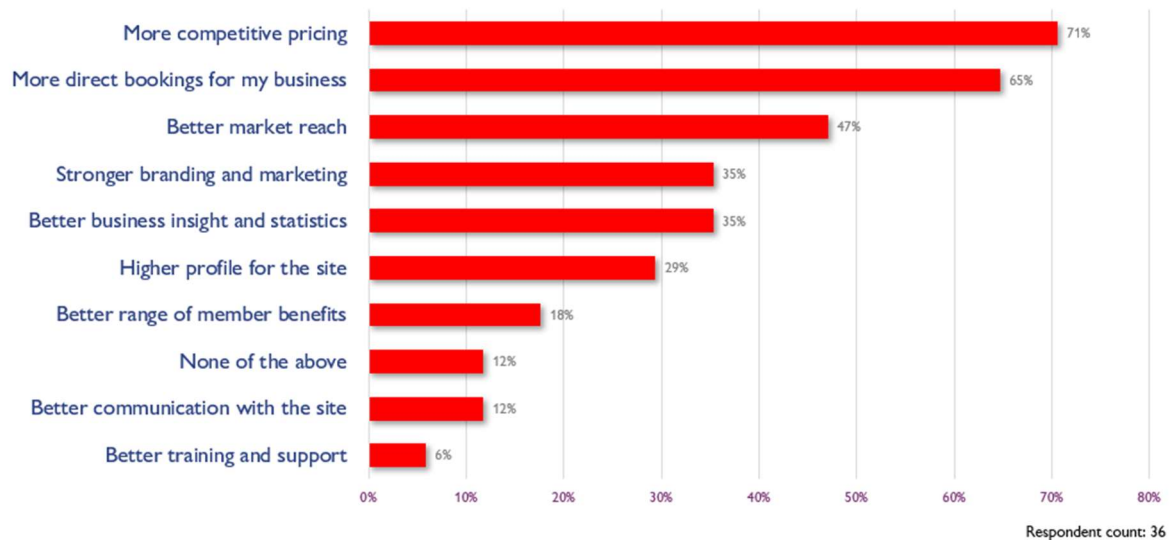


Fig.9

These results are interesting, indicating that cost is the biggest factor influencing business sign-ups. This, despite the fact the basic listing on the site is currently free. Notwithstanding this, clearly, the charging tariff is hindering the development of the site. Respondents are also concerned about direct bookings and citing this as determining factor when considering subscribing. Clearly, the Council has failed to fully communicate the availability of direct bookings on the platform.

The Visit Looe system was further discussed at a workshop organised for local businesses held on 27th November at Tregoad Holiday Park. 27 businesses were represented at the workshop and were provided with the results of the survey – including the data presented in Figs. 6 - 9. The workshop considered these findings and the comments received from survey respondents and at the previous workshops with users and councillors. We tasked the group to assess each comment and assign a ranking, using a priority sheet. In this way we were able to gauge the overall importance of the issues discussed and where consensus is located. It should be noted that many of the businesses present were not users of the system, nevertheless the results

are informative. The issues discussed together with the weighting ascribed to each is set out in the table below:

Business Workshop: 27 th November Issue Analysis		
Top priority for Action	Some action may be required	Lowest priority for action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce the cost of using the Visit Looe service. • Improve communication between Visit Looe and its users. • Refresh and relaunch the Visit Looe site. • Make basic listing free for all users. • Incorporate more dynamic video and drone footage. • Reduce 'big-banner' single company sponsorship. • Simplify cost bands, starting with a free listing. • Keep up to date with latest events and updates. • Link to effective social media posts. • Be clear about the role and purpose of Visit Looe. • Train support staff to maximise the value of Visit Looe. • Focus on a 'year-round' approach to content. • Visit Looe should be a public service - not commercial. • Make service free for all users. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide better business insight data for Visit Looe users. • Broaden access to a wider range of businesses. • Abandon notion of 'break-even' and focus on public service. • Improve content on the site to broaden value and appeal. • Outsource the service to the private sector. • Involve users in content creation. • Remove the bookings module it is costly and ineffective. • Cater for market segments - families, weekenders, etc. • Take on board feedback, improve Visit Looe and stick with it. • Looe Town Council should support VL as a public service. • Retender to a more responsive provider. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discontinue the Visit Looe service completely. • Set up a user group or discussion forum to improve support. • Leverage the past investment in Visit Looe and maximise its value. • Run a redesign workshop with the developer and users. • Recruit volunteer brand ambassadors to promote Visit Looe. • Use the Visit Looe branding and logo more widely. • Use the Visit Looe branding to build a new tourism partnership. • Set up a Visit Looe stakeholder board. • Set up a community interest company to run Visit Looe. • Broaden remit - a 'whole town' approach.

Fig.10

Many different views were expressed at the Workshop, there were strong opinions expressed on some issues. In particular, there was a very vigorous debate around whether Visit Looe should continue in its present form at all. This debate was encouraged. The results above show the broad consensus reached by the end of the event. The consensus view centred around several key factors. Improving content, reducing costs, reconsidering the dominance of partner advertisement and improving support and communication.

Welcome to Looe and Polperro

While Looe Town Council was exploring the concept of the Visit Looe website, it had discussions with another provider who was interested in creating a commercial destination website. These discussions faltered and on the 30th of July 2020 the destination website Welcome to Looe & Polperro (WLP) was launched.

The effectiveness of WLP was not assessed as part of the current review and we do not have insights from its users or web analytics available to present a detailed analysis of its performance in comparison to the VL service. The only observations offered are based on visits to the site, the information published on the platform and the bid submitted to the Council.

The WLP site has continued to grow and build strong brand identification in the town and wider area it covers and it offers a valued service for its users. WLP is attractively designed using Wordpress and may be viewed as more up to date and current than VL. Currently, it hosts more listings than Visit Looe (across a wider area). It offers a cheaper option for business customers – businesses are charged £15 for a basic listing and £50 for a featured listing (more detailed and with more images). In addition, listings for CICs, charity or voluntary organisation is free. In 2022, £1,000 was donated back to local good causes (Looe in Bloom to the Polperro

Fishermen's Choir) and this year the site has committed to gift 10% of all advertising revenues to local good causes.

LGRC could find no published statement accounts and no indication of the level of income derived from the site. A search of records at Companies House found no entry for WLP which is owned and operated by a sole trader. Therefore, it is not clear how the business is financed, constituted, or regulated in the UK. Depending on the outcome of this review and decision of Looe Town Council, more information about the trader's position would need to be clarified.

WLP is focused on the communities of Looe and Polperro but accepts customers from the wider Southeast Cornwall area – from Polruan to Torpoint. WLP has over 17,500 verified followers on Facebook and Instagram. The site states that it has received 400,000 unique visits since its launch in July 2020. The site is divided into five main sections – accommodation, eating and drinking, shopping, exploring and weddings.

Over the last three years, there has been a degree of competition between the two sites and relationships have been strained. In the summer of 2023, WLP submitted a proposal to LTC, asking for the Council to discontinue VL and enter into a cooperative arrangement with WLP. Clearly, there is a commercial incentive at the centre of the proposal, but it would have the advantage of freeing LTC of the costs associated with VL.

In combination, Visit Looe and WLP have attracted over 1m visitor web page views since 2020 - 667,710 for Visit Looe and 400,000 for WLP. And while impossible to quantify exactly, in tandem, the sites are driving considerable business to the Town. The existence of WLP has clearly impacted on traffic to VL.

Working group research and conclusions

The Council has set up a working group to deliver the Visit Looe review. Councillors have spent time looking at websites that use different software as well as sites that use Simpleview. This work has enabled Councillors to look at alternative providers, different approaches to content, cost and resourcing.

The Working Group has:

- Reviewed 18 websites managed or funded by similar sized town/parish councils.
- Reviewed statistical data of current website and social media provision.
- Reviewed set up costs and annual costs.
- Held a stakeholder meeting with the advertising members of Visit Looe.
- Appointed the Local Government Resource Centre to prepare this report.
- Launched the Visit Looe Survey.
- Undertaken desktop research to support the review.

The Working Group's study of alternative websites, concluded:

- Each parish or town council has its own bespoke solution.
- There is no consensus/best practice model.
- There is a wide spectrum of software solutions.
- Staffing allocation varies (from 5hrs – 7 TIC staff inputting data).
- Some Councils use third parties to deliver a visitor website.
- Some, but not all, seek to recover annual costs through membership/advertising.
- Some see a website as part of the service they provide to their locality.

The group also looked at funding and concluded:

- None of the town or parish councils studied makes a profit from visitor sites.
- Visual impact is important as is a strong local voice.
- Most are marketing a destination for visitors.
- Decreasing need to provide accommodation booking facility.

Following a meeting with site users the group concluded:

- Users are positive about **strength of the Visit Looe brand** and potential of the website.
- Users like that Visit Looe is a **reputable website**.
- Important that their businesses were linked to a **trusted provider**.
- Room for improvement regarding content – **more staff time required**.
- Visit Looe and Welcome to Looe & Polperro were **complementary and can co-exist**.

Following its research, the Group has offered the following additional observations:

- Visit Looe was costly in its first year (perhaps because of some missteps).
- Net costs have reduced year on year from 9.8% of Council's turnover to 2.3%.
- Original plan of profiting from the site looks unachievable.
- So, if we run our own website there will be a cost even if we have income.
- Lowest weekly staff hours of websites researched = 14 hours. Ours is now 13.25 hours.
- Income has steadily increased but the pattern is uneven and needs stability.
- Many towns have no website income and meet the cost in full as a public service.
- Websites using Simpleview are generally more expensive to run than home-made ones.
- Have the capabilities and capacity of Simpleview been fully exploited?

Acknowledgments

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- Everyone who has taken the time to provide their views to LGRC.

LGRC Report: conclusions

This report has examined:

- The findings of the Looe Town Council Working Group.
- The financial and website data analysis submitted.
- Desktop research and previous studies.
- The results of the Looe Tourism Survey.
- The views expressed at three consultation workshops.
- The bid submitted by WLP.

A table summarising the conclusions relating to the Visit Looe site is set out below:

VISIT LOOE	
✓ Positives	✗ Negatives
<p>Simpleview site</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The Council invested wisely in a platform more than capable of delivering the service intended when launched. ✓ Simpleview is a well-resourced and reliable platform, market tested and providing the full functionality and capability required. ✓ Simpleview provides a managed service with ongoing system upgrades to improve the service and adapt to technological or regulatory changes, building in resilience and future-proofing the site. ✓ The site benefits significantly from advanced search engine optimisation (SEO). ✓ Preformatted content is attractive and site navigation is simple and intuitive. ✓ The booking module adds value for compatible businesses. ✓ User approval rating is good overall. ✓ Users most value the sector-specific design of the platform, the credibility of association with a public body and the SEO optimisation. ✓ Users value the potential for growth and that the platform complements and integrates well with third party sites and services. 	<p>Simpleview site</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ The potential of Visit Looe has yet to be fully realised and is falling short of expectations. ✗ Council curated content is uninspiring, not updated regularly enough and lacks impact. ✗ Images are tired and need regularly refreshing. ✗ Placement of Council content is not always logical, or it appears in the wrong place. ✗ Listings and user content are not always kept up to date. ✗ The direct booking module is not offering benefits for smaller businesses. ✗ The site has not been adequately resourced and managed. ✗ Users (and potential users) are concerned about subscription pricing, interaction with the site and the over-dominance of partner advertisements. ✗ A plausible and well used local alternative is available – WLP.
<p>Costs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The Council has spent nearly £91,250 (net) in developing and maintaining the system since 2020, this represents a significant investment in the tourism industry in Looe. ✓ Income generated from the site in 2022/23 is estimated at £7,940 which has grown from £5,000 in the first operational year. ✓ The net annual cost has reduced from 9.8% of the Council's budget to 2.3%. ✓ The cost of running the service is relatively modest. ✓ Based on the financial analysis, there is no pressing need to make changes based on cost. 	<p>Costs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Further Council investment will be required to achieve the original brief. ✗ Income targets were unrealistic at the outset and the site is unlikely to ever cover the full running costs. ✗ The site has too few paying subscribers and is over reliant on 'big brand' advertisers. ✗ Costs are too high to attract smaller businesses. ✗ Staffing support is too low, has been poorly coordinated and lacked leadership.

VISIT LOOE	
✓ Positives	✗ Negatives
<p>Performance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Visits to the Visit Looe site increased by 40% in the last year to 993,952. ✓ The number of site users has grown by 15,000 over the last year to 106,940. ✓ Page views have increased by over 60,000 in the last year to 295,482. ✓ Performance compares reasonably well with the Visit Fowey Simpleview site. 	<p>Performance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ The site needs to drive more listings. ✗ Social media has not been adequately exploited, particularly when compared to WLP. ✗ The bookings module is performing poorly for smaller businesses and detracting from the potential value of direct referrals.

Options for consideration by Looe Town Council

The following options are presented for consideration. In accordance with the preference of the Working Group, LGRC makes no recommendation.

Option 1: Discontinue Visit Looe

At the outset, the Council expected that Visit Looe should achieve cost neutrality with income meeting running costs. As the Working Group states, this was an unrealistic expectation. None of the 18 council destination sites reviewed makes a surplus. Unless the Council decides that the site is provided as a subsidised public service, then Visit Looe should be discontinued. This option would involve no further action by the Council.

This option will have the following implications:

- The public investment made in the site (around £91k) will be lost.
- If Visit Looe is decommissioned the Council will save around 12,000 per year, resources that could be invested in core business activity.
- If this option is pursued, then the Council will need to begin urgent consultation with the users of the site who will lose a valued and trusted service (just before the start of the 2024 holiday season).
- Will leave WLP as the sole provider of destination services for the Town.
- The overall destination site visits driven to Looe by VL and WLP will reduce by around 50%.
- The Council's reputation may be impacted by the consequences of this decision.

Option 2: Maintain Visit Looe

If the Council decides to retain the Visit Looe service and extend the existing contract with Simpleview for a further period of up to 3 years, then it will need to accept that this is based on providing a subsidised public service for the economic benefit of the Town. It should be accepted that the site is unlikely to ever run at a surplus, although this should not preclude efforts to further reduce the net running costs of the site. The Council will also need to revisit its commitment to the site and address the shortcomings highlighted in this report.

This option will have the following implications:

- The public investment made in the site (around £91k) will be maintained.
- The Council will need to budget in the region of 12,500 per year to maintain the service in 2024/25 and beyond.
- The Council will need to review its organisational support for the service following the departure of the Business Development Officer, this could involve relocating the service with the tourist information team.
- The Council may need to invest further funds to address the shortcomings highlighted in this report.
- The Council will maintain an effective public service solution for businesses.
- The Council will continue to demonstrate its key strategic role in supporting the local economy.

Option 3: The Welcome to Looe & Polperro Proposal

The owner of WLP has proposed that the Council enters a partnership with WLP when the Simpleview contract expires. This partnership would see the WLP website become the 'official' tourism website and social media feed for Looe. The current Visit Looe website would be taken offline; with the URL acting as a redirect to the WLP website. Under this agreement:

- Looe Town Council's team would continue to provide the face-to-face tourist information centre service.
- WLP would work closely with the team to help fund and provide branded materials, such as the new Visitor's Map.
- WLP would give direct access to the events and what's on module of the website to the Council team, so that they can upload any events taking place, either those they are directly or indirectly responsible for, as well as wider community events.
- WLP would work closely with the Council's team, as well as other third parties, on the branding and promotion of any events being organised or facilitated in the town, providing more consistent branding and promotion.
- WLP would work closely with the Council team on social media messaging around key events and activities throughout the year.

This option will have the following implications:

- The public investment made in the Visit Looe site (around £91k) will be lost.
- Cost savings of around £12,000 per annum will be made from 2024/25.
- WLP will be the sole provider of destination management services in the Town.
- If this option is pursued, then the Council will need to begin urgent consultation with the users of the Visit Looe site who will lose a valued and trusted service (just before the 2024 holiday season).
- The Council would need to enter into an agreement with WLP to ensure the benefits of the proposal are realised and to secure the ongoing availability of the WLP platform should the current owner decide to retire or discontinue involvement.
- The agreements would need to be in place prior to the service of notice to Simpleview.
- The Council would need to seek advice from its internal auditor about the financial and legal implications of council staff time being used to maintain a website owned by a private business.
- The Council may need to seek assurances from WLP that it will be properly registered and regulated in the UK – either as a charity, CIC, or private business.

Option 4: The Liskeard Model

This option emerged from discussions held by the Working Group and offers a new opportunity that realises the potential savings of Option 2 but maintains a distinct and complementary role for Looe Town Council.

Essentially, this would see a new website created utilising the benefits of the Town Council .gov.uk domain. The Liskeard site (www.liskeard.gov.uk) has three separate elements – the Council's formal site, a destination site, and a local information site. These three services are delivered seamlessly within a strongly branded portal. Looe Town Council could adopt a similar approach and either retain the existing Simpleview site or simply swap in the WLP site to provide the tourism element. If the WLP option is pursued, then the resources released could be used to develop and sustain the local information service (community events and information aimed primarily at residents – bus and train timetables, tide times, flood warnings, weather forecasts, local community groups, events, photos and videos, walks, cycle routes, newsletters, etc.

Option 4 (a): Liskeard model with Visit Looe retained

With Visit Looe retained, this option would have the following implications:

- The public investment made in the Visit Looe site (around £91k) will be maintained.
- The Council will need to budget in the region of 12,500 per year to maintain the Visit Looe service in 2024/25 and beyond.
- The Council will need to review its organisational support for the Visit Looe service following the departure of the Business Development Officer, this could involve relocating the service with the tourist information team.
- The Council may need to invest further funds to address the Visit Looe shortcomings highlighted in this report.
- The Council would need to allocate new funds to commission and support the new community information site.
- The Council may wish to change its domain to www.looe.gov.uk to improve accessibility.

Option 4 (b): Liskeard model working with Welcome to Looe & Polperro

With Welcome to Looe and Polperro site replacing Visit Looe, this option would have the following implications:

- The public investment made in the Visit Looe site (around £91k) will be lost.
- Cost savings of around £12,000 per annum will be made from 2024/25 which could be used to support the community information website.
- WLP will be the sole provider of destination management services in the Town.
- If this option is pursued, then the Council will need to begin urgent consultation with the users of the Visit Looe site who will lose a valued and trusted service (just before the 2024 holiday season).
- The Council would need to enter into an agreement with WLP to integrate the site into the Looe portal.
- The Council would need to seek agreement with WLP to minimise overlapping or duplicated content with WLP focused on visitor information and LTC focused on community information.
- To replicate the Liskeard model fully, the Council would need to commission a new website and branding with associated costs, although this may be funded, in part, from savings if Visit Looe is decommissioned.
- A cheaper alternative may be to redevelop the existing Town Council website home page to provide this functionality – it is suggested that the domain www.looe.gov.uk is secured if this option is pursued.