

## **Finance and General Purposes Committee Report for the Town Meeting**

**May 2023**

As with every Local Authority the past year has seen increasing pressures on our finances due to the inflationary pressure that is affecting us all. The Council is concerned that any increase in Council Tax is unwelcome and up until this year we have managed to keep any increase to a very low percentage and Ilfracombe has remained at the lower end of the scale when compared to other Towns in North Devon. We have now been hit by two main factors. Firstly the increases in the cost of living which will be reflected in the recommended national pay awards and of course the steep increase in utility costs affecting all of our properties. Secondly, the announcement by North Devon Council that unless we assume the management and running costs of all Public Conveniences, they will be closed.

Although we have been able to increase the tariffs at the Ropery Car Park and impart modest increases in rental levels at the Ilfracombe Centre and the Lantern we have still needed to increase our Precept by approximately 10 per cent. The projected cost of running the Public Conveniences will swallow up this extra income and it is inevitable that we will need to take money from our 'reserves'. Although we have had to take approximately £30K from our 'reserves' over the past year they remain fairly healthy and we had committed a figure in the region of £80K towards the bid to the Governments Levelling Up Fund for improvements to our Sea Front. Unfortunately this bid was unsuccessful but it will be a sad day if this money has to go towards running the public toilets rather than towards the improvement to our sea front.

I am pleased to say that our income from the Lantern Centre has been maintained with a gradual increase in the hire of the premises as we recover from the Covid pandemic. With regard to the Ilfracombe Centre we have now lost the regular income from North Devon Council which was a major contribution to the running costs of the building. We have however, with the financial support of Devon County Council, developed a 'Work Hub' in the basement area where office and desk space can be rented. The take up has been slow so far but as this is a new venture that has only just been completed

we are optimistic that clients for the space will increase as we proceed with our advertising campaign. The work hub is called 'Luma'.

We have negotiated an agreement with Primary Care Network to employ members of the new 'Well Being' team comprising Social Prescribers and Community Developers who will work and be managed on a day to day basis by the Doctors Surgeries at Ilfracombe, Lynton and South Molton. Initial interviews have been carried out in conjunction with our own staff and we are responsible for their conditions of employment. For this responsibility we receive a commission approximately equates to the loss of income that we suffered with the departure of NDC from renting office space at the Ilfracombe Centre. This agreement has been achieved through the offices of the board of One Ilfracombe and helps to make One Ilfracombe sustainable as a percentage of the hosting fee is retained in the Company.

The income from the Ropery Car park was slightly above our budget figure and we still receive an income from the parking above Cheyne Beach. Our charges have not increased for this facility with the aim of supporting local businesses in providing secure parking for the owners and staff.

We have now completed the majority of the maintenance required on the Lantern Centre and we have kept some money in reserve for the replacement of the lift when required.

We continue as Trustees of the Vision Centre at Slade and our voluntary Committee continues to manage this building. Bookings for the Centre tend to be fairly erratic with some groups finding it difficult to maintain their operation due to a fall of in clientele due to the underlying cost of living problem. However the finances of the centre are 'sound' and income is generally in line with expenditure. The floor in the ladies toilet has been replaced by volunteer labour with the only major expenditure being made to lay the new floor covering.

Last year we took over the responsibility for the Dotto train and the operation was sub contracted to Crabb Contractors. The operator introduced a 'hop on, hop off' service which proved quite successful where customers were issued a wrist band for the purchase of a day ticket. The same operator has been engaged to operate the train for the 2023 season. The main development is

that North Devon Council have now passed ownership of the train to us at the Town Council but at the time of writing we still await details of the transfer documents.

We have now received the replacement 'fingers' for the finger posts and our own staff are gradually installing these. This has not been straightforward as the old fingers have tended to weld themselves to the posts and removal is difficult. The new 'fingers' were provided under warranty from the manufacturer.

We continue to manage the public toilets at Lee Bay in partnership with the Resident's Association. As mentioned above NDC have indicated that they will close down all the remaining public toilets unless we, as a Town council, take over responsibility. Our staff have carried out an audit of each premises and it is likely that we will be asking NDC to carry out work on the toilets to bring them up to a standard where it would be acceptable for us to take them over. We are also in contact with a private Company who operate the toilets in Torbay to see if it is feasible for them to take responsibility. There may be substantial capital investment required which may be a deterrent.

We have now installed two vehicle electric charging point at the Ropery Car Park and these are just about covering their costs. We hope that this situation will improve to give us a small profit but keeping pace with the cost of electricity is problematic.

Our investment in the High St lighting allowed us to organise the Combe Christmas event which proved very popular but our staff spent many hours in the organisation. Further work on the lights was required as overhead parts had deteriorated and a sum of around £3.5K needed to be spent on the electrician's time and materials.

We continue to award grants to local organisations to help with particular needs for equipment and event funding. It has been noticed that events have been very slow in recovering from the pandemic and that groups are finding it difficult to recruit volunteers. We have awarded grants to the value of around £15K for this coming year and we also maintain our financial support for the Tourist Information Centre which we regard as being vital to the Town.

Our own maintenance staff are always busy with work on the Ilfracombe Centre, the Lantern, the toilets at Lee and on the street furniture. Following the numerous complaints about weeds during last summer we are now re-introducing a weed spraying regime to try and combat the problem.

Our Town Maintenance Operative is constantly working on the 'green' areas in and around the Town and this has made a remarkable difference in showing that we care and that we want to present the Town in a positive manner to our visitors. It is good to see that the Britain in Bloom committee has re-formed and we look forward to more floral displays this summer.

It has been very important to maintain our commitment to the hospital car service over the past couple of years and I thank Sarah Maddocks and all our volunteers for keeping this going when living with the uncertainty of appointments being cancelled at the last minute which has severely affected the operation of this vital service.

My gratitude goes to all of our staff who have supported this Committee and I hope that the new Council will continue to work in a positive manner, in difficult times, to make the Town better for residents and visitors..

Cllr Rod Donovan, Chair of Finance and General Purposes Committee  
2022/2023.