

Okehampton Town Council would like to hear your views about the Budget and Precept for 2023/24

The Council will have to make a decision about its budget and precept for 2023/24 by the end of January and would like to hear your thoughts about the public toilets.

What should the Council do - close the toilets in Market Street to save a projected £24,696 from the budget/precept or keep them open?

Okehampton Town Council's budget is mainly met through the precept – this is an amount that is collected for the Council by WDBC as part of the town residents Council Tax bill. In 2022/23 for a Band D property this was £140.26, or £2.69 p/week. This pays for local services including the upkeep of Simmons Park, Clapps Wood, the skatepark, Town Hall and Charter Hall, public toilets, CCTV, some of the bins and benches, and the cemetery amongst other things.

Over the past few months Councillors have been scrutinising the council's budgets in preparation for the new financial year which starts on 1st April. This process started in September when budget workshops were held to review expenditure to date in this financial year and to look at what might be needed for the next.

Committees examined their elements of the budget over the autumn and the Policy and Resources Committee made a recommendation to full Council in December which included that the need for the council to maintain two sets of public toilets in the town should be considered. The two sets of toilets are in Market Street adjacent to the bus stop/taxi rank and at Fairplace. Fairplace toilets are owned by the Town Council whilst those in Market Street are leased from WDBC who otherwise would likely have closed them a few years ago. Rising costs for their cleaning, maintenance and utility bills mean that together these two sets of toilets are expected to cost £38,143 in the coming year (Fairplace £13,447 and Market Street £24,696).

The Council is about to embark on a major roofing project of the Charter Hall to ensure that it is watertight and available for use for generations to come. Grant funding for this type of project is hard to find but applications to potential funders have been made, unfortunately the council were turned down by the Lottery Community fund. Funds need to be built up for the replacement of the Town Hall windows which are rotting, this building being Grade II* listed.

Insurance premiums are expected to rise by at least 100% from £19,842 to £40,000 for the year and electricity/gas costs are doing the same. Investigation has been undertaken into the possibility of installing solar panels on the Charter Hall roof, but because the building lies within a conservation area this would only be possible on the Red Lion Yard elevation. Unfortunately, this is the side which gets less light and is the most difficult for installation and future maintenance because of its proximity to adjoining buildings. Where possible budgets have been reduced or cut completely, for example the annual Civic Dinner budget will have to be completely self-funded. Last year unspent funding was rolled forward in the budget instead of being added to general reserves to help keep the precept down, but this year any remaining funds will need to be directed to the Charter Hall repair fund and the council will reluctantly have to increase the precept to meet costs.

There has been a small growth in the Council Tax Base (the amount of properties that the precept is split between) and it has increased by 30 properties which will help to spread the cost slightly. The majority of the new development is outside of the town boundary and within the Hamlets meaning that those people do not contribute towards the cost of the services in the town that are offered by the Town Council.

Please send your thoughts to the Town Clerk by email townclerk@okehampton.gov.uk or post to the Town Hall, address below, by Friday 20th January 2023. Comments left on social media may not be picked up and will therefore not be taken into consideration.