

REPORT - Consultation Meeting on 18th October 2016, Newport Memorial Hall.

Over 50 people attended the meeting run by the National Park to **“to discuss proposals to change the way that information services are delivered in NEWPORT.”** – mostly locals, but with a sprinkling of 2nd home owners and visitors. This is to be compared with the 3 people who turned up for Tenby’s consultation a week earlier.

Tegryn Jones National Park CEO chaired, County Councillor Mike James (St Dogmaels), Chairman of the National Park and also Chairman of the Task and Finish Group that (unknown to the public) had been meeting to *“explore potential changes to the provision of information to visitors, including the future roles of Tourist Information Centres and Visitor Centres”* “since May 2015, gave a short welcome and organised questions. Two other National Park Authority Members were present in the audience – Mrs Gwynneth Hayward (also Member of the Task and Finish Group) and County Councillor Paul Harries (Newport, and Vice Chairman of Pembrokeshire County Council). James Parkin, Director of Discovery and Delivery presented the National Park’s case.

The first question was “On what are we being consulted: has the decision been taken by Members to Close and Sell Newport Visitor Centre or not?” The answer to the 2nd part of this question had not been given in the presentation and still remained unanswered.

It became clear that the audience was speaking almost with one voice. Everyone who spoke did so to give examples of the Centre’s value to locals and visitors and businesses alike, and to press that the Centre be retained. That is bar one – a Newport Town Councillor - who praised the National Park for its plans to retain information services of some other kind in Newport, and one other person who suggested that perhaps a smaller centre costing less elsewhere would suffice. Even the National Park said that other sites had been looked at and none was suitable and anyway would hardly be less costly than the £21,000 which was the Newport Visitor Centre’s net cost last year.

People expressed astonishment that if that is all that Newport’s Centre costs (out of a total cost of the National Park’s 5 Centres – Tenby Visitor Centre, Carew Castle, St David’s Oriel Y Parc, Castel Henlys and Newport of £471,000) that the National Park should think of closing it, especially as it is performing well, and decreasing its very small deficit year on year. A visitor asked why those who use the Centre (39,000 last year) were not asked to donate 50p to cover the running cost.

Tegryn Jones responded that the National Park’s plans were not being financially driven. He firmly believed that the alternative forms of delivery of information would be more effective than a static Centre in future. However, the National Park could produce no evidence of how such methods had worked elsewhere, and were criticised for citing the city of Swansea – which is a totally different situation, as having introduced something similar. Nor had they investigated whether local businesses are prepared to cooperate in being trained as ambassadors and by displaying information etc. It was pointed out that hardly any of Newport’s shop fronted businesses were accessible, as the Centre is designed and adapted to be, and don’t have spare space or time especially in the season when information services are most needed.

Reg Atkinson quoted from the Director of Delivery and Discovery’s Report “The future of visitor services – a route-map to new models of service delivery” (which has been provided under a Freedom of Information request) that the sale of Newport’s building *“Generates a capital receipt to pay for Tenby lease exit costs”*

Several people felt it would be wrong to sell a building - which they understood to have been partly purchased and renovated through funding derived from a legacy to the National Park from a Newport resident - to pay off Tenby Centre's lease. Tegryn Jones denied that this would be the case.

A spokesman for the Friends of the National Park stated that the Friends were adamant that the Newport Visitor Centre should be kept open. Another Friend, speaking as an individual, felt the future lay in cooperation with the community so that various groups would use the building to its maximum potential. He observed that Newport lacked the leadership to achieve this. A member of the Community Library Working Group described aspirations to move the Library to this better located site, but feared that ideas to turn this into a multi-use Centre would be thwarted by lack of space.

The value of the Centre as an outpost to National Park HQ at Llanion Park to Newport's residents and also National Park staff living in the North was pointed out. Plans and other documents can be brought here and meetings arranged to save the long journey to Pembroke Dock and the use of the building by officers should enable greater mutual understanding between the National Park and the people of this area.

Several people spoke of the futility of the limited survey of use of Newport's Centre by the National Park who seemed not to have taken on board the use made by the community of the Centre already – from Paths Group meetings to Tennis Court bookings, to exhibitions by local artists.

It was pointed out that Newport's Centre is not just a Tourist Information Centre. It is a Visitor Centre serving to interpret a large geographical area which is Welsh speaking and special in that it is quite different from the rest of the Park. Newport is a Tier 3 Centre in the Wales Spatial Plan which means the Town has a strategic role which is on a par with St Davids and Saundersfoot – the only other Tier 3 Centres in the National Park. Expenditure on Newport compared with St Davids by the National Park has been derisory. Our small Visitor Centre punches well above its weight and should remain.

Several people said that the National Park encouraged use of public transport wherever possible and that Newport's Centre is ideally located on the T5 bus route but also with the Coastal bus stopping at its door. It is also very close to the Coastal Path and useful to those walkers as it is one of the few information points along its length (and the Centre's mobility scooter enables people to enjoy some semi-wild environment along the Burma Path to Parrog and the Iron Bridge) The same could not be said of other sites at which information is proposed to be placed in future.

The National Park Officers and Members left with a lot to think about. The Director of Discovery seemed to accept that the consultation period is too short. He may advise that a decision by the Authority is deferred from the end of November to the beginning of February 2017, thus extending consultation beyond 31st October.

Cllr Paul Harries explained that he had declared an interest and had not taken part in National Park discussions up till now because his family's Post Office could well become a venue for a new approach to service delivery. However, he was seeking special dispensation to be able to put across the community's views in future.

Sandra Bayes 19th October 2016