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Councillor Mike James
Chairman
Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority
Llanion Park
Pembroke Dock
SA72 6DY

Dear Cllr. James

Information Provision for National Park Visitors and Residents – 2017 and Onwards

I write on behalf of the FPCNP as a local community organisation. I refer to the Director of Delivery and Discovery's report to the NPA 52/16 which was presented to the Authority on 28/09/16 and to your subsequent consultations with communities in Newport and Tenby.

Whilst the Friends welcome the opportunity to comment on the proposals, we wish to register a formal objection to the imminent proposed closure of both of these Information Centres on the basis of these main principles:

- That the proposed closures are being rushed through before the perhaps lower cost proposed alternatives can be tested and proven to be effective replacements.
- That consultation is currently on the basis of one set of proposals without adequate opportunity for communities to engage in the process with the NPA and work up their own ideas for alternative scenarios.
- That, once disposed of, the centres could not be easily replaced in suitable locations.
- That the NPA's often repeated wish to engage more fully and directly with local communities and visitors is being negated. Direct personal contact with the public is proposed to be reduced. This will add to the common perception that the NPA is a remote bureaucracy, unfeeling, austere and distant from its communities.

- If cost saving is not the main driver (as officers claimed at the public meeting on 18th October) then a more measured, incremental approach would seem to be wise.
- That the proposed revenue expenditure savings (especially at Newport) are modest in extent and the consequent loss of communities' and visitors' goodwill would be great. This would further damage the NPA's reputation.

We accept that the now widespread use of the internet and smartphones makes it easier for the public to get basic information about accommodation, site locations and visitor facilities, both before they arrive (if visiting) and when they are here – although mobile signal coverage is very erratic in the rural areas. However in terms of interpretation, a tiny screen cannot compete with professionally-mounted exhibitions, video and personal interpretation by staff – the latter having been proven to be the most effective mechanism in terms of influencing attitudes and behaviour.

Newport NPVC

In this case, the existing building is ideally placed, with car parking adjacent, and it has developed an excellent reputation both in terms of customer service and the quality of the interpretive exhibitions. The idea that this facility could somehow be replaced by training staff from local businesses to give out NP information (let alone interpretation!) is based on a false premise. Most businesses in the town are small and the staff do not have the time to have extended conversations with visitors about the National Park – also there is no parking adjacent to most of these businesses. The staff are too busy trying to make ends meet to have enough spare time to purvey NP information! (And to what extent would they absorb NP information?)

The local community and the FPCNP are highly sceptical of the alternative information mechanisms which are suggested in the report. These alternative delivery ideas are essentially unproven and not supported by any research. Some of them were tried a few years ago and had no lasting effect. Local people do not think that these alternatives would be effective – indeed they think that cost-saving is the main driver for wanting to destroy such a well-respected and successful centre, despite officers' denials (in the meeting 18/10) that this is the case.

Unfortunately there is currently a lack of leadership in the Newport community partly due to conflicts of interest and also, illness. This is making it difficult for the community to respond effectively to what is being perceived as a “steam-rolling” set of proposals by the NPA and, again, goodwill will easily be lost. In such a case the NPA should be showing leadership, compassion and greater understanding of local community needs and concerns. Arguably the NPA could be said to be poised to “throw the baby out with the bath water.....!”. Deferring or delaying a decision would be of help to the community and is the very least that the NPA could/should offer?

If the NPA needs to downsize its operation at Newport, clearly it should retain the existing, ideally-placed building and consider renting out parts of it to the local community

– such as the library, town council, arts/craftspeople, etc. The information centre could be shoe-horned into a smaller space within the existing building or perhaps the premises extended at the rear? A multi-use facility could generate cost-savings in terms of rent income, community functions would be enhanced and brought together and the NPA would retain the staff workspace/meeting facilities which currently help to avoid many unnecessary extra journeys to Pembroke Dock, saving money, time and fuel/emissions. Importantly there would be a gain in terms of goodwill - rather than a major loss. The vital personal element of information and interpretation would continue. By retaining ownership of the premises, the NPA would retain control of what happened there.

Tenby NPVC

In this case the parameters are different. We accept that there is perceived duplication with the PCC TIC just around the corner, although that does not provide any interpretation. We do also accept that scarce public money must be seen to be spent as effectively as possible, so, in view of the existence of the TIC and the Museum/Art Gallery, etc. close by, then perhaps the Tenby NPVC has to close sooner or later – albeit with the loss of a major interpretive exhibition – and staff work base.

However, if the cost of buying out the lease is £160K then it would seem a far better use of that money to keep the centre open until 24/12/19 for what would be only a slightly greater cost! If that additional cost is only about £80K then that amounts to about £27K per year over the three years. Surely this is a fairly modest revenue cost, enabling the service to continue? Also the NPVC could provide the premises and even some of the staff in order to try out some of the alternative information delivery provisions suggested in the report 52/16?

Summary

Overall we see this current process as flawed and unsatisfactory. These closure decisions are major and essentially irrevocable. If there is not the immediate urgency to save money – as officers argued in the public meeting - then decisions should be deferred and centres remain open whilst all alternatives are fully explored and tested. More open-ended consultations with communities are clearly needed so they have time to suggest more options. Equally, we would be happy to discuss all the ideas further, if desired.

Yours sincerely

Steve Drinkwater

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Chairman