

To: Mr Tegryn Jones, Chief Executive, Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority  
CC All Members of the Authority

Consultation Response to the proposed

“Changes to the way that information services are delivered in Newport”

31<sup>st</sup> October 2016

I prefix this response with an expression of hope that the end of this all too short consultation will mark the beginning of an adequate period of cooperation between the Authority and local people, businesses and visitors in finding solutions for the delivery of information in the North East of the Park, which will meet the needs of all parties involved.

In the following, I have had to assume, in the absence of a reply to my letter to you of 22nd October (attached) that the current situation is that -

*“the Authority is currently consulting on new ways of delivering tourism information locally, but is presently committed to withdrawing from our premises in Newport and Tenby in the near future”* - though I have been given no evidence that Members have a commitment to the latter part of this statement from you.

I have studied the information supplied to me by you, including the presentation by the Director of Delivery & Discovery to the consultation meeting in Newport on 18<sup>th</sup> October 2016, the minutes of the Task and Finish Group on *The Future Provision of Information to Visitors*, the background documents and reports provided to this Group, and some accounts and budget figures related to Newport.

I have been unable to understand how a decision to dispose of Newport Visitor Centre has been reached despite the funding challenges that you face and the desire to explore innovative means of delivery of information services in future. That is, except for

- The Authority appearing to have regrettably lumped Newport together with Tenby as presently providing static services which are not unique, no longer appropriate, and intrinsic to local needs, within the geographical areas they serve. This may be true of Tenby, but it is not so for Newport
- The fact that closing Newport’s Centre and selling it, conveniently *“Generates a capital receipt to pay for Tenby lease exit costs”*. The Future of Visitor Services – A Route Map to New Models of Service Delivery: A Report by the Director of Delivery and Discovery. May 2016 Footnote Page 11.

I also note that you have failed to supply Members with adequate information about Newport, the area it serves and what the Visitor Centre does, from which a properly informed decision could arise.

The reports and documentation given to the Task and Finish Group that you have now supplied to me do not give an adequate picture of what Newport Visitor Centre achieves.

Although you have honestly described your surveys of Visitor Centres' use as "*limited*", you have been highly remiss in not drawing attention to just how limited these surveys were. Pretty as your pie charts are, they should not have been relied upon so much to explain the use of the Centres to Members. Only a total of 25 people seem to have been involved for Newport (out of the 39,000 annual footfall, which is hardly representative). Members do not seem to have learnt directly from Visitor Centre staff what complex needs of visitors are met by them.

The Authority has been at fault in not involving local people, businesses and visitors in deliberations about future services long before this point at which a final decision is all but made. Surely, it is highly significant that the Friends of the National Park who have a closer ear to the needs of people living and working in and using the Park, have spoken adamantly in favour of retaining Newport Visitor Centre, now that they have at last been consulted.

Newport is a Tier 3 Centre in the Wales Spatial Plan, with a strategic role to play within its special geographical area. Tourism is vital to the Newport area's economy. It is therefore highly appropriate that a Visitor Centre should be sited here where it can easily be reached by public transport, is on National and Regional Cycle Routes, and the Coastal Path. It would be contrary to the Wales Spatial Plan to base information services for this area at Castell Henllys in future.

Newport's Centre is first and foremost a Visitor and Information Service, to which the *tourist information* function, which you are so sure can be replaced, has only recently been added and which plays a minor role.

Newport Visitor Centre performs very well indeed for the National Park within this geographical area in meeting the core function of promoting opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of its special qualities by the public.

You have a duty to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities in carrying out primary purposes. Are you convinced that selling this building is the best way for you to do this? Why, in planning your area hubs, do you consider that Newport Visitor Centre is less effective in meeting the National Park's primary purpose than Castell Henllys, so that Newport's Centre will be the first to go?

Newport Visitor Centre serves the North East – the largest geographical and most sparsely populated area within this National Park - which is Welsh speaking and physically, historically and culturally different from the North West and the South. What there is to do in this area of quiet tourism is not immediately obvious to visitors, and won't ever be through improved IT alone. It requires time, local knowledge and

face to face contact to explain. For these reasons alone, a Visitor Centre is justified here.

Unlike other Tier 2 and 3 Spatial Plan Centres, the Visitor Centre is Newport's only wet-weather facility for Visitors: we have no castle open to the public, no Cathedral, no museum. Newport Visitor Centre is located at the heart of Newport, adjacent to the public car park and designed to be fully accessible. No other building in Newport comes so close to providing a heart to this community. Losing this facility will be a retrograde step for the both this town and for the National Park.

Nor is it fair to argue that 39,000 is a small percentage of the total 4,500,000 visitors to the whole of Pembrokeshire in justifying disposal of this building so as to provide a more "equitable" service-delivery. What is equitable about concentrating on your flagship at Oriel Y Parc? Newport Visitor Centre is costing very little to run - Less than 50p per visitor to it – or to put it another way, 4.5% of the total £471,000 that the National Park's 5 Centres are costing annually, whilst attracting more than 14% of the total 270,000 visitors (including school parties) to them all (a total figure which incidentally is itself only 6% of the visitors to Pembrokeshire)

The Visitor Centre is, and has been for a very long time, important to this community. Over 25 years ago the fledgling Environment Group, later to become the West Wales Eco Centre, used the space as an information point during the winter months. More recently the Centre has provided space for meetings with PLANED, NRW, PAVS, Newport Forum, NAEG, Materion Carningli, Newport Paths Group, Newport Library Working Group etc etc. Whilst you note that Newport has other community venues, they all have major shortcomings and none offers the same level of convenience, parking and accessibility. The Centre does a grand job of advertising local activities and events so that visitors can join locals in enjoying them. There is no other public interior space in Newport suitable for this purpose and no outside notice boards adequate to do so.

Very importantly to this peripheral community and to all those who live in the North East of the Park, so far from PCNPA HQ at Llanion in Pembroke Dock, the Visitor Centre provides a Park outpost with an office for all types of staff, but particularly rangers and planning officers, which is adjacent to the small meeting space providing contact with community members as necessary. Plans and other documents are brought here to save residents the long journey to the other end of the County, and Park staff can also be saved that commute. Apart from by the Rangers, not nearly enough has been done to exploit this opportunity for better understanding of this area's and this community's needs by the National Park, especially at this time of replacement of the Local Development Plan.

As you are aware, so important is this building to Newport's sustainable development that at least one community group would like to move in if the layout can be reconfigured and a programme of use arranged to enable flexible and multi-use, including retention of your visitor service, thus maximising the building's potential.

Turning to the new approaches to service delivery, I am astounded that these are proposed to replace Newport Visitor Centre by next season if a final decision is

made in either November or February by Members. I cannot find evidence that you have yet tested these ideas in the North East of the Park, even begun to explore the possibility of doing so with local community groups and businesses on whom you will rely, or surveyed the locations which might become involved to ensure accessibility, absence of safety issues etc.

I would like to invite you to come to Newport to negotiate your way around this town in a wheelchair or by using walking aids. I challenge you to find somewhere to park close to local businesses which you envisage to be alternative points for delivery of information in future, particularly during the high season when this information is most needed.

Having criticised you for using limited survey results above, I am loathe to tell you the results of my asking Newport businesses for their thoughts, but as, with the only exception of businesses owned by a Park Member, I find they speak with one voice, I will do so. They are none of them fully accessible or have the time or space to perform this role, even if they have the will to help. I know from my own experience over years of running 3 different retail businesses from 6 different locations in Newport whilst always trying to provide information to both residents and visitors, this isn't easy here, especially whilst coping with the huge upward swing in trade in the summer. Local businesses in this strategic town won't be stepping in so easily to fill the void if you remove the Visitor Centre. This is a fact that you should be taking very seriously indeed. Most businesses, including self-catering businesses and serviced accommodation owners and even *Coastal Cottages of Pembrokeshire* say they send people to the Centre, receive excellent reports afterwards and want to continue to do so.

I ask you also to heed those who are telling you about network coverage – There has been a bad mobile reception in Newport for years with no sign of anything being done about it, which is surely a pre-requisite of your plans. Nothing will ever replace the skilled people-to-people contact that the Visitor Centre provides.

You could not answer my question as to whether you had sought other sources of funding to support your new programme of service delivery. Surely if you will be involving so many volunteers in innovative approaches, then there will be grants available, if not to the Authority, then to other organisations with whom you could be involved in partnership in retaining both a static visitor service and your new proposals.

The Director of Delivery and Discovery has raised the possibility of forming a Tourism Business Improvement District. At the moment some 60 self-catering businesses, mostly owned by non-full time residents in Newport ward alone, pay no business rates (due to rate relief), no council tax and no contribution to the local precept, yet they possibly benefit more than most from the existence of the Visitor Centre and some arrangement whereby they are given the opportunity to contribute to its cost would seem appropriate, whether through establishing a TBID or not.

Reg Atkinson and I were immediate neighbours to Miss Moncrieff when she left her house to the National Park and at the same time the 2<sup>nd</sup> cottage forming the Visitor Centre was acquired and the renovations carried out. We were aware of her wishes and along with many others in this community feel it would be morally wrong, though I doubt illegal, for the National Park to sell the building on the open market

However, it would also be contrary to the Wales Programme for Government *Taking Wales Forward 2016-21* where under Community Assets it is stated that government will “*Work with communities to protect local facilities that bring people together*” and “*introduce measures to prevent unnecessary closures and to help communities take ownership of community assets*”

In view of the widespread interest in this community for the static visitor services to remain and also in the possible use of the building for other community purposes, if the Authority insists on proceeding with a plan of disposing of the premises, then surely a Community Asset Transfer, whereby we are able to obtain it at less than market value, will be appropriate.

Thank you for your attention

Sandra Bayes

### In summary

Newport Visitor Centre's future has been swept up in the decision that the facility in Tenby is no longer necessary, whilst the sale of the Newport building conveniently funds the cost of exiting Tenby.

Members have not been given to understand the importance of the Visitor Centre in fulfilling the National Park's second core function for the North East of the Park from Newport, which is the most important strategic settlement here, or of its vital support to the local economy. Further they were unaware of the significant community role that the Centre plays and its important function as an outpost to an all too distant HQ

Newport Visitor Centre costs little to run and less for each visitor it serves than the other National Park Centres

The proposed replacement methods of delivery of information to visitors are largely untested here. The premises of community organisations and businesses are not easily accessible, if they are accessible at all, and no one has the time to provide an adequate service, particularly in the summer season. .Willingness to become involved has not begun to be explored. The mobile network is inadequate here.

Additional sources of funding both to keep the existing service in Newport and explore innovative approaches do not seem to have been investigated.

Above all the National Park should be working with residents, visitors and businesses and its own staff to ensure the best solutions are achieved for all for the future.