

Natural Resources Wales Board Q&A Session – Thursday 23rd May 2024

Public Attendees and Questions As at 20/05/24

Blue text – specific question for the Board meeting (redacted)

Name	Question / Area of Interest	Current Situation	Allocated for response to:
	<p>1) Who made the decision to move Ynyslas Visitor Centre in the Commercial Department (where is clearly is not appreciated or valued) and could it be moved what would it take to move it into Operations or Resource Management where it belongs?</p> <p>2) Is the board aware that the public has been misled repeatedly by the Commercial Department in relation to their plans for Ynyslas Visitor Centre? When asked about plans to close it, the Executive claimed there had never been a proposal to close it (despite it being published and circulated on November 29th 2023 (please see attached obtained through a Freedom of Information request), and extract of written answers submitted in response to questions raised at a Public Meeting in Borth on 13/2023</p> <p>3) Why should the public trust NRW to tell the truth in future or act in the best interests of nature, the environment and public?</p>	<p>The decision to move Visitor Centres from operations into commercial was made in May 2023 by the executive team. Public funding is exceptionally tight across the whole of the UK. As such, we are having to look across all of our remit and critically review what we can and must continue to do, what we stop, and what we slow or do differently to fulfil our Corporate Plan ambitions. This is no different to any other public sector body at the moment.</p> <p>We have already taken significant steps to reduce our financial pressures, such as tighter recruitment controls and reducing use of agency and temporary contracts. This has given our Board and Executive team more time to consider our priorities and to agree this with Welsh Government. Our visitor centre review sits within this wider work.</p> <p>The Correspondent has submitted an additional letter to the board where this has been addressed.</p>	
	<p>Ynyslas Visitor Centre is very different to the other two centres being considered for closure. It may be small, but it's value is immense - as a centre of wellbeing, public education, and dune maintenance. Can you reassure us that its future will be considered individually, bearing in mind the important role it plays for current and future generations?</p>	<p>Visitor Centre operations are being considered both from the overarching Natural Resources Wales (NRW) needs and remit, and on the individual benefits and risks each site has. We appreciate the value all our centres bring the estate. For example, at Ynyslas we appreciate that it is situated within a National Nature Reserve (NNR) and</p>	

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		there is a need to consider the ongoing future of the NNR as well as consider the Visitor Centre itself. Its uniqueness is being considered as part of the review and we are not advocating a one-size fits all approach to their futures.	
	How does NRW ensure it complies with the seven goals contained in the legislation of the Future Generations Wellbeing Act with regard to future plans for Coed Y Brenin?	NRW greatly supports the Wellbeing of Future Generations act and the seven goals contained within it. Our duty is to apply these goals against our statutory functions and our corporate plan objectives. In addition, Coed Y Brenin is managed under several other requirements including Sustainable Management of Natural Resources and the Forestry Act, for example. The future of Coed Y Brenin is being considered against all these legal requirements as well as the organisations own ambitions. Final plans in relation to the Visitor Centre will be agreed by the Welsh Government.	
	How are NRW planning to comply with the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, 2015, if they are going to close down the three main centres in Mid Wales that encourage people to get out into the countryside and do exercise?	To confirm no final decision to close the visitor centres has been taken. Visitor Centres are not a statutory service and even if the centres themselves are closed, the sites will still be accessible and useable, toilet facilities will remain, and recreation trails will still exist. NRW greatly supports the Wellbeing of Future Generations act and the seven goals contained within it. Our duty is to apply these goals against our statutory functions and our corporate plan objectives. Coed Y Brenin is managed under several other requirements including Sustainable Management of Natural Resources and the Forestry Act, for example. The future of Coed Y Brenin is being considered against all these legal requirements as well as the organisations own ambitions. Final plans in relation to the Visitor Centres will be agreed by the Welsh Government.	

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	<p>We have not received any clear message from NRW regarding the proposed closure, initially financial reasons being given and now environmental reasons. If parking is to be restricted on the beach, where will the cars go?</p> <p>Many members of the community are prepared to become involved, to ensure a sustainable future for the Ynyslas Visitor Centre. Please can NRW outline their current thinking and plans for the beach and Ynyslas Centre?</p>	<p>NRW has been clear in its message that it needs to reconsider what we continue, stop and do better, to achieve the ambitions set out in NRW's Corporate Plan. In the case of visitor centres this has always been partly financial and partly environmental. For Ynyslas there are significant concerns regarding visitor pressure on the site and the environmental impact of parking on the beach, as well as increasing operating costs and liability costs.</p> <p>As yet, no final decision has been made. We are keen to work with the community group and start those conversations, once we know what the offer is on site.</p>	
	<p>NRW has stated that it has a partner ready to take over/share in the management of the Visitor Centre at Ynyslas. Can NRW please confirm this and say who is the partner.</p> <p>Question: In their 'VC Futures Briefing Note Ynyslas' sent to Ynyslas staff on November 29th 2023 NRW stated that: 'The VC should be offered to the community for use as a social enterprise or other community use. Commercial Team to progress discussions to ascertain interest.' As the most vocal community group interested in the future of Ynyslas, Save our Centre has not seen this offer. Will NRW please confirm to whom such an offer has been made and what progress has been made on any discussions.</p>	<p>NRW has not started discussions with any interested parties who are ready to share the management of the visitor centre. However, we are aware that the community have expressed an interest in working with us. To date, no offer has been made to any parties or community groups.</p> <p>We are unable to ascertain the viability of an interested party until we know what the offer is on site and that is dependent on the final decision.</p> <p>Once we are clear about Ynyslas' future, we can reconsider what action we take with regards to any community interest.</p>	
	<p>Can you please tell me how you intend members of the public to access the beach at Ynys Las if you decide to close the carparking on the beach ?</p>	<p>If the carpark does close, visitors to the site will need to park in Borth and walk to the site. At this stage we would be looking for the disabled parking to still be available for blue badge holders.</p>	

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	<p>Having just read a reply to ***** I would like to know how it can be legal to close the right of access to the ancient road that led to the ferry at Ynyslas. What sort of barriers will be used that can still allow access for the 'ferry', access for emergency vehicles and access for the army to dispose of ordinance that is regularly found on the beach.</p> <p>I would also like to ask -where is the evidence for these pollutants (tyre micro plastics and oil leaks) at Ynyslas. I have never seen evidence of major oil leakages.</p> <p>The visitor pressure will be more of a problem when there are no wardens to control and educate the flow of people as I am quite sure they will still come.</p>	<p>We are still exploring the issue of the right of access to the road with Ceredigion Council and we are making an exhaustive search to determine the exact position.</p> <p>With regards to barriers, we have these across the estate we manage that offer access to emergency vehicles etc. and there are multiple systems available that allow selective access.</p> <p>The types of pollutants mentioned in the response are well documented. Like a lot of pollution, it is gradual buildup that is an issue. It is important we protect these sites for a long time to come. However, surveys are currently taking place to provide a site report with regards to the environmental impacts on site.</p> <p>We are aware Ynyslas is unique and want it to remain so. The NNR will continue to be funded and staffed regardless of the Visitor centre review outcome.</p>	
	<p>How would NRW be accountable for any shortcoming in the protection of the dunes and wildlife if it had to close the visitor centre?</p> <p>While I understand that closing the car park may be beneficial for the reserve (e.g. pollution), how NRW would account for the possibility of people parking along the road and in the car park of the sea front junction owned by the golf club? Hence, people would still invade the sand dunes, with no surveillance (e.g. no NRW staff at cafe doing their invaluable job of serving customers, and keeping an eye on the surroundings)? How would you ensure accessibility and protection of the area if none is on site?</p>	<p>The visitor centre and the team that manage the National Nature Reserve are separate teams and have different statutory duties. It is important to separate the two, even though we appreciate the additional staff presence on site has had a positive impact on the NNR. Visitor Pressure at the site is a major concern. We are currently assessing the impact of closing the carpark on both the environment and knock-on impacts such as those you have mentioned with regards to parking.</p>	

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	<p>Save Our Centre – Ynyslas Group</p> <p>Dear NRW board members,</p> <p>In light of your forthcoming meeting & on behalf of the 7,090 concerned individuals who signed the combined petitions - we're confused.</p> <p>As one of the 200 plus attendees at the Borth meeting I heard Sarah Jennings state loud & clear (I'm not one of those who is hard of hearing) that it was not the intention of NRW to close Ynyslas Visitor Centre. She also made the following statements & suggestions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coed y Brenin & the Kite Centre were making losses of £300.000 & £400.000 per annum respectively, while Ynyslas is losing £50,000 per year. • This shortfall in the case of Ynyslas could easily be remedied by increasing the car-parking fee to £4.00. • Nothing would be or has been discussed without consultation with the community. • The words 'complete transparency' were used repeatedly to describe NRW's conduct, both previously & with regard to the future of the centre. <p>So, it was with horror & disappointment that I read the letter from NRW dated 23/11/2023 referring to a paper written on 31/10/2023 stating the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The decision was made to close the VC to the public as of winter 2023 & NRW would be liaising with facilities on how to 	<p>No final decision on the visitor centre has been made. We acknowledge that a miscommunication occurred, causing a potential 'option' to be mistakenly taken as a final decision. Staff were rightly informed but then the 'decision' was immediately withdrawn, and the team have been continuing to review the options open to NRW.</p> <p>Although there is a financial element to all our Visitor Centre provisions there are also other factors such as visitor pressure, pollution, damage and long-term viability of the sites to consider. Raising car park charges does not mitigate all these considerations.</p> <p>With regards to consultation, Visitor centres are not a statutory service and therefore consultation is not legally required in this instance, however if there is scope to consider community takeover of Ynyslas we will consult with the community on how to make that happen.</p>	

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	<p>utilise or dispose of the site which is due to be decommissioned.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consideration to remove parking from the beach. <p>I'm sure I don't need to spell it out that both sets of statements are in direct opposition. Please ask the board to explain because I'm struggling to see what consultation with the community & complete transparency have to do with the plans made last year.</p> <p>Regards, *****</p>		
	<p>Please can you return to me to let me know which date this discussion will take place and how we attend the meeting virtually.</p>		
	<p>Please could we ask why Ynyslas visitor centre was moved into the commercial division, when it is not a profit making organisation, and also why at the Borth community meeting, NRW representatives stated repeatedly that the centre was not decided as definitely being closed, and that it was "miss information "when a FOI request for information (memo dated 29th November 2023) since had proved otherwise and the decision had already been made without any public consultation or Senedd member involvement, to close it?</p>	<p>The Commercial Team within NRW is responsible for maximising value, which includes not only income but also people and planet benefits on the estate we manage on behalf of Welsh Government. Public funding is exceptionally tight across the whole of the UK. As such, we are having to look across all of our remit and critically review what we can and must continue to do, what we stop, and what we slow or do differently to fulfil our Corporate Plan ambitions. This is no different to any other public sector body at the moment.</p> <p>We have already taken significant steps to reduce our financial pressures, such as tighter recruitment controls and reducing use of agency and temporary contracts. This has given our Board and Executive team more time to consider our priorities and to agree this with Welsh</p>	

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		<p>Government. Our visitor centre review sits within this wider work.</p> <p>We acknowledge that a miscommunication occurred, causing a potential 'option' to be mistakenly taken as a final decision. Staff were rightly informed but then the 'decision' was immediately withdrawn, and the team have been continuing to review the options open to NRW.</p> <p>Visitor Centres are not a statutory service and as such there is no legal requirement for consultation with regards to their future operations.</p>	
	<p>What does VisitWales think of the various moves NRW seems to be making to prohibit parking on the beach at Ynys Las and to close the visitor centre there?</p>	<p>We would recommend reaching out to Visit Wales with your question, as we are unable to speak on behalf of them.</p> <p>NRW's remit is an environmental one and our focus is protecting and enhancing the natural environment in Wales. We agree that Visitor Centres have an important place in the landscape of Wales, however they are not a statutory service, and we must ensure our funds are directed as outlined in our remit from Welsh Government.</p> <p>Once the decision has been made on the future operations of NRW and its Visitor Centres we can explore other options including community ownership, passing them to other organisations, and outsourcing where feasible.</p>	
	<p>Question: Does the process that must surely precede a decision on the future of the Ynyslas Visitors Centre include a public consultation, an environmental impact study and an attempt to identify any other stakeholders in the natural resources of Wales who might partner NRW in keeping this valuable facility open?</p>	<p>While there won't be a public consultation on the initial decision taken by NRW, since Visitor Centres are not a statutory service, there may be consultations at each of our Visitor Centres regarding the next steps and future management. This could include input from other non-profit organisations, community groups, or environmental</p>	

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		organisations. Environmental impact studies are currently underway.	