

P-06-1447 Stop Natural Resources Wales closing the visitor centre at Ynyslas National Nature Reserve – Correspondence from the petitioner, 10 September 2024

Ref Petitions 246323 and Save Ynyslas earlier petition

Dear Petitions Committee

I trust you have already received my response to the earlier petition, which was considered at your July 8th meeting. Please let me know if I need to resubmit any of this.

In addition, I was asked by Huw Irranca-Davies' office for further information, which I have submitted. Please confirm that you can access these documents and let me know if I need to resend anything.

This email is in direct response to the submission you received from NRW. The letter from Clare Pillman is almost identical to the notification we received from NRW when they eventually confirmed their plans to close the Ynyslas visitor centre at the end of July.

This notification came months after they had repeatedly claimed that no such decision had been made despite having sent staff the "Ynyslas – Visitor Centre Futures Staff Briefing Note" on November 29th 2023 (I can supply a copy of this document if you need it).

The document clearly stated (and I quote directly):

The continued provision at Ynyslas was not considered feasible, and the decision has been made to close the VC to members of the public as of the winter of 2023. Whilst the minutes do not address all the reasons for making this change a number of factors in the report supported its long-term closure.

Offices will still be accessible by staff as will the toilet provision on site. We will be considering how to remove carparking on the beach front. We will be liaising with facilities on how to best utilise or dispose of the site in the future.

For the staff impacted they will not be made redundant and are not at risk of redundancy. Staff will be offered the same employment terms but working at the Visitor Centre Bwlch Nant Y Arian. The meeting today was not a change process consultation. We will be issuing more details on the next stage of the process in the coming weeks.

Ynyslas - Key Messages:

o The café and shop should not be opened in 2024, however the toilet facilities should remain open.

o Ynyslas VC staff to transfer to Bwlch Nant yr Arian VC.

o 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.

o Next steps would be to work with VC staff on site, Facilities, the Land and Place Management Teams. This to include how we should approach the operational practicalities of the proposed removal of carparking on the beach front.

After we started raising objections to the closure, NRW claimed there had been a miscommunication. They told this to us on the ONLY occasion they have engaged with the community or public since issuing the document at a meeting in Borth on March 1st. We obtained a copy of the briefing via an FOI request. When we said it appeared not to be a miscommunication but an official document, they claimed it had been communicated without the correct authorisation. There is now a complaint with the Ombudsman Wales in relation to how they have dealt with the public over this. The case number is 202404060.

The contents of the letter NRW have supplied to you (attached to the email you sent to me) are also the same that has been circulated to the press and have no additional details. I understand they cannot disclose further information until the staff consultation closes on September 13th. Hopefully, they can update you before the Petitions Committee meets on September 16th.

In Clare Pillman's submission, she says that NRW plans to close the retail and catering facilities at their Visitor Centres to save money. However, this demonstrates that she does not understand what happens at Ynyslas Visitor Centre. It is neither a retail nor a catering facility. It is a Visitor Education Centre with a small gift shop and minimal refreshments. The interactive educational displays help visitors understand the biodiversity, geology and history of the place.

The staff at the Visitor Centre are not catering staff or solely retail operatives. They mainly work as wardens across the entire site and spend a proportion of their time within the Visitor Centre building. The staff are incredibly knowledgeable about all aspects of the site. Their work includes collecting parking money, advising visitors where it is and is not safe to park due to tidal conditions, and assisting the land manager with overall site protection. This includes, from March to September, the

daily cordoning off of an area of the dunes to protect the endangered Ringed Plover breeding sites, collecting rubbish and fly tipping and ensuring visitor safety.

There is a good deal of unexploded World War II ordinance on the beach, and the staff are regularly required to alert bomb disposal when visitors accidentally uncover dangerous finds.

One seasonal staff member has sent us the following concern:

Something they need to really think about is the number of visitors the centre staff personally warn about not going in the water. We've all regularly turned around cars on the gate who have arrived purely to swim (mainly with children) and sent them back to Borth. Most are really thankful, didn't realise red flag, didn't read the signs, etc. Some are not thankful and do it anyway, but most listen. Add to that the people in the water (many with kids) who staff tell during their patrol, and it's a sizeable amount of people who will now be at significant risk if the staff are not there... and also the first point of contact to raise the alarm when things go wrong.... Not just people either; we've had pets/dogs get into difficulty in the water, too....

In addition, to protect nature, the staff do regular dog poo collection walks. Not accounting for what was deposited in the bins, in 2023, the staff kept a record of every occurrence of finding dog poo (both bagged and not bagged) and logged it. They 'uncovered' 852 deposits in 2023 and are sure there were others. If uncollected, as well as being unsightly, polluting and dangerous, the dog poo damages the habitat for rare plants on the site because it enriches the soil (which is not what they need). This year, they have collected 632 deposits to date. We can provide the breakdown of bagged and unbagged if required.

Save Our Centre – Ynyslas – Achubwch Ein Canolfan is an unincorporated group of concerned citizens who have worked tirelessly since last December trying to engage with NRW.

Earlier this year, the group commissioned the report: **“Ynyslas: Aspects of the importance of the site and NRW’s responsibilities to it.”**

Its authors are Juliet Regan, who has particular expertise in the site’s orchids; geologist John Mason, an expert in conservation and climate change; and geographer Dr Margaret Hughes, who has a specialism in tourism and access to the countryside. The report was submitted to NRW, but there has been little response to its extensive and thoughtful contents other than a ‘thank you, the report has been received’ communication. (Copies can be supplied to the Committee on request)

The key point we would like to draw your attention to is:

The potential removal of almost £49 million from a community with only 1125 residents - 2022 census - would be totally devastating ... NRW makes much of its responsibility for wellbeing; the potential death of a local community at the hands of NRW does not contribute to the wellbeing of members of that community.'

Quotes from a Marginal Difference Analysis supporting the document include:

'The consequences to businesses (of closure) are expected by those businesses to begin immediately and to continue for up to 10 years. They include the immediate closure of a restaurant and diminished profitability to most, if not all, of the businesses responding to the survey...they are expected to affect every business in Borth at some point over the next 10 years and to result in a number of business closures.'

' "Although there are already elements of anti-social behaviour reported, these are expected to increase across the board as a result of lack of warden oversight at the visitor centre...dangers to property and life are expected to result."

We would also like to understand from the NRW how the closure of the Visitor Education Centre aligns with The Future Generations Act.

At the February NRW Board Meeting, we submitted the following question.

Q. What is the anticipated saving if the Visitor Centre is closed?

NRW's response in writing was

A. There would be minimal savings on the annual operating budget.'

In view of the answer to that last question, why are NRW threatening to close a centre that will have no positive impact on their £ 13 million shortfall?

Finally, despite claiming that access to the site will be maintained, NRW has not adequately considered how the access will happen. When we questioned where visitors would park if parking on the beach were stopped, they advised that people could park in Borth and walk down. It is over 2 miles from Borth to Ynyslas, and there is already insufficient parking in the village. The site attracts around 400,000 people a year and is essential to the local community, environment and tourist industry.

Polly Ernest

On behalf of Save Our Centre – Ynyslas – Achubwch Ein Canolfan

